Liberating Esau:
A Corrective Reading of the Esau-Jacob Narrative in Genesis 25-36

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to examine the characterisation of Esau in the book of Genesis and offer a favourable reading of the Esau story as a corrective to the usual negative readings. Traditional interpretations of Esau in Jewish and early Christian literature have provided a negative image or portrayal of Esau which contemporary Genesis commentators in their turn draw on to interpret Esau as cruel, stupid, and impulsive, having no concern for the family tradition or the future legacy. The present study revisits these negative perceptions of Esau and rereads the texts according to the sequence of the Jacob-Esau narrative.

The present study intends to counterbalance this generally hostile view of Esau by emphasising the full potential in Genesis for a positive and favourable reading of Esau by examining a series of textual cruxes. Where more positive readings of Esau are suggested, this is not necessarily a claim that such readings are to be adopted, but rather to demonstrate that the negative interpretations are not the only option.

Negative interpretations of Esau do not originate from the depiction of Esau in Genesis itself but are derived from the biases against Esau of a succession of later interpreters. The negative image of Esau in the text of Genesis itself is demonstrably less strong than that of contemporary Genesis commentaries. After the careful scrutiny of the Jacob-Esau narrative, other biblical texts which deal with Esau, and representative commentaries, it is concluded that the Genesis narrator has characterised Esau as a favourable and honourable character. Genesis commentators have obscured this with their negative assumptions about Esau, influenced by their focus on Jacob the chosen one.

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Abbreviations

AASOR	*Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	Anchor Bible Dictionary
BA	*Biblical Archaeologist*
BAR	*Biblical Archaeology Review*
BASOR	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
BR	*Biblical Research*
BSac	*Bibliotheca sacra*
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quaterly*
CJud	*Conservative Judaism*
CTJ	*Calvin Theological Journal*
Di	*Dialog*
ExpTim	*Expository Times*
HBT	*Horizons in Biblical Theology*
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
ITS	Indian Theological Studies
JAAR	*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
JANES	*Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JBQ	*Jewish Bible Quarterly*
JES	*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
JQR	*Jewish Quarterly Review*

LTJ	*Lutheran Theological Journal*
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
PEQ	*Palestine Exploration Quarterly*
PRSt	*Perspectives in Religious Studies*
RB	*Revue biblique*
RefR	*Reformed Review*
RSP	*Ras Shamra Parallels*
ResQ	*Restoration Quarterly*
SBET	*Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*
SJOT	*Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
TZ	*Theologische Zeitschrift*

Introduction

The present study is an inquiry into the characterisation of *Esau*, Jacob's twin brother. The story[1] of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25-36 is one of the most well-known stories in the Bible. The number of studies of this narrative now makes it difficult for any individual either to read or simply list all of them. However, almost all scholars have interpreted the story by primarily focusing on *Jacob* who is chosen by God, not on Esau the forsaken firstborn. Esau is generally not the first person one remembers when one thinks about the story of Jacob and Esau[2] as is evident in contemporary Genesis commentaries. Genesis commentators generally refer to Genesis 25-36 as "the Jacob narrative", "Jacob cycle", "Story of Jacob" or "Jacob-Esau narrative", not "the Esau narrative", "Esau cycle", "Story of Esau", or "Esau-Jacob narrative",[3] even though Esau is Jacob's older brother.

The purpose of this study is to review the biblical depiction of Esau in Genesis and offer a new and favourable reading of Esau. According to my

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[1]In the present study, I will use the terms "story" and "narrative" interchangeably since they are normally used that way in English.

[2]Frank A. Spina comments, "When people bring up the prominent story in which Esau is a main character, typically they refer to "the Jacob and the Esau story," not the other way around, even though Esau is the older of the brothers." See Frank A. Spina, "Esau: The Face of God," in *The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 15.

[3]See how Genesis commentators title Genesis 25-36. For example, E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB 1; Garden City: Doubleday, 1985) ["The Story of Jacob"]; Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997) ["The Jacob Narratives of JE" and "The Second Part of the Jacob-Esau Narrative"]; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) ["The Jacob Narrative: The Conflicted Call of God"]; John E. Hartley, *Genesis* (New International Biblical Commentary 1; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000); ["The Jacob Narrative"]; Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) ["The Account of Isaac's Descendants"]; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) ["The Isaac/Jacob Cycle"]; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC 2; Waco: Word, 1994) ["The Story of Isaac"]; John J. Scullion, *Genesis: A Commentary for Students, Teachers, and Preachers* (Old Testament Series 6; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992) ["The Jacob Cycle"].

survey of literature which I will briefly discuss in more detail in chapter one, *Esau's Interpreters*, the dominant interpreters on Esau, including contemporary Genesis commentators, New Testament writers, and the rabbinical tradition, have provided a negative image or portrayal of Esau. Ernest Neufeld comments, "The traditional view of Esau is that he was rash, impulsive, emotional, quick-tempered, lacking in appreciation of his father's and his own spiritual legacy."[4] Nor is the contemporary view of Esau any more positive. As Frank A. Spina comments, "The biblical figure of Esau is a character we love to hate, so to speak . . . No wonder Esau has been a standard negative role model in church and Sunday school. It is difficult to think of another biblical character more deserving of the designation "outsider."[5] This traditional approach to Esau or traditional view of Esau is where I have found the research problem for this study. Why have most Genesis commentators and other traditions about Esau interpreted Esau in Genesis unfavourably or negatively? Does this derive from the intrinsic elements of the Esau texts in Genesis? Or is it from the external bias of the interpreters? Can Esau, "our standard negative role model", be rehabilitated?

The claim of the present study is that a close reading of the Esau texts without any prior bias against him can legitimately provide Esau with a changed image: a favoured man and a favoured brother. Esau can be rehabilitated. This study challenges the unquestioned assumptions that we as readers have about Esau the forsaken firstborn. My thesis is straightforward. Negative interpretations of Esau do not originate from the depiction of Esau in Genesis itself but are derived from the biases of a succession of later interpreters, including our contemporary Genesis commentators, the New

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[4]Ernest Neufeld, "In Defense of Esau," *JBQ* 20 (1991): 43.

[5]Spina, "Esau: The Face of God," 14.

Testament writers, and rabbis. In fact, I will argue that the Genesis narrator can be interpreted as having portrayed Esau in a favourable and honourable way — not merely in a sympathetic way as many commentators have pointed out. However, most Genesis scholars have not entertained the possibility of such a positive and favourable depiction of Esau's character in Genesis. There are only a few occasional comments on this aspect of Esau's character. It is the intent of this present study to counterbalance this generally hostile view by emphasising the full extent of the potential in the text for a positive reading of Esau.

Why then is it important to re-evaluate Esau's image? Why am I so concerned with Esau, a forsaken firstborn whom many readers or scholars do not care much about? First of all, my own situation as a firstborn son in the context of Korean culture[6] prompts me to give my primary attention to Esau as I read the story of Esau and Jacob. Since the right of the firstborn has been regarded as precious in Korean culture as in many other countries, it gives a motivation for re-evaluating the Esau story. I am an interested reader, like everyone else, embedded in my socio-cultural context.

Secondly, my personal concern for the marginalised in society has also made me read this story focusing on the minor character who has not drawn much attention from scholars. Readers inevitably tend to read a biblical story from the perspective of the major characters such as Abraham, Jacob, and David. This phenomenon also happens even when one watches a movie partly because its plot development often draws the attention of the audience to the main actors. Main characters like Jacob are at the core of the plot development in a biblical narrative. However, they do not carry the whole story. Minor

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[6]Like the firstborn in Israel, the position of the firstborn in Korea has been regarded as very special throughout history.

characters like Esau have an integral role. A fuller understanding of the whole story also depends on how we understand the relationship between main characters and minor characters in the story.

Thus far, I have explained the research problem, purpose and claim of this study. I have also stated the motivation for this study of Esau. In this introductory chapter, now I will explain my reading strategy and presuppositions as an interpreter, in order to show how my reading of Esau will be different from prominent Genesis commentators' reading of Esau. After that, I will explain the plan of this study.

Interpretative Framework: Defining Myself as a Reader

Everyone interprets the Bible in their own way.[7]

Steven L. Mckenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, in the introduction to their edited book *To Each Its Own Meaning*, comment on the above statement:

> This sentiment is often expressed during informal discussions on the nature of the Bible and the beliefs to which it gives rise. And the statement contains an element of truth. Different people certainly come away from the Bible with different understandings; no two people see it exactly the same way.

As Mckenzie and Haynes point out, different interpreters interpret the biblical texts with different understanding. All interpreters have their own interpretative framework which consists of their presuppositions, responses, values, attitudes, and beliefs that are ethical, cultural, social, doctrinal, philosophical, or theological. In the 1920s, Martin Heidegger already pointed

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[7]See Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, "Introduction," in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application* (ed. Steven L. Mckenzie and Stephen R. Haynes; Revised and Expanded; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 5.

out that interpretation is always grounded in the fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception of the interpreters:

> Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us. If, when one is engaged in a particular concrete kind of interpretation, in the sense of exact textual interpretation, one likes to appeal to what "stands there," then one finds that "what stands there" in the first instance is nothing other than the obvious undiscussed assumption of the person who does the interpreting.[8]

As already suggested by a number of scholars, all interpreters have their own preunderstanding and presuppositions. Our way of being affects our way of reading or interpreting the Bible. The purpose behind our interpretation also affects it. Crucial to this study is therefore defining my interpretative framework: understanding myself as a reader. In the present study, I will introduce Esau's interpreters, criticising their negative presuppositions, responses, values, attitudes, or beliefs about Esau. It is therefore necessary to explain my preunderstanding and presuppositions for the purpose of interpreting the story of Esau beforehand. They will help to explain how my interpretation of Esau will be different from other interpreters.

With regard to present scholarly opinions on where meaning resides in the three worlds of author, text, and reader, my emphasis on the Esau story is twofold: text-centred and reader-oriented. This twofold emphasis may seem contradictory in nature. While text-centred approaches focus on the intrinsic textual elements, reader-oriented approaches tend to have their focus on

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[8]Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson; New York: Hapers & Row, 1962), 191–2; Quoted from W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (rev. ed.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 187. Martin Heidegger's original German work was published in 1927.

extrinsic factors such as the gender, culture, and social context of the reader. On the one hand, various reader-oriented approaches may be classified as *subjective* approaches as they give great importance to the role of the *reader* in constructing meaning from the text. However, the potential problem of reader-oriented approaches is that a text can mean whatever it means to its readers if this approach goes to its extreme.[9] On the other hand, the text-centred approach may be regarded as a relatively more *objective* approach than a reader-oriented one. However, it is my belief that no one can claim a completely objective reading of the text because constructing meaning from the text always involves the reader's extrinsic factors such as the gender, values, attitudes, culture and social context.

In view of the tension between the text-centred approach and the reader-oriented approach, what I presuppose in this study is that meaning comes from the interaction between the text and the reader. Biblical scholars have long been discussing the dynamics between the texts and the readers. Robert C. Culley, in his introduction to *Semeia 62: Textual Determinacy Part One*, puts the question succinctly:

> To what extent and in what manner do texts determine and control their own interpretation and to what extent and in what manner is meaning determined by factors lying outside the text in the reading process?[10]

The process of reading is complex and no one has given a firm answer to this question. Uncertainty still exists in the scholarly discussion of textual determinacy in the reading process. There is an undeniable phenomenon that

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[9]J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines, "The New Literary Criticism," in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (ed. J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines; JSOTSup 143; Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1994), 19.

[10]See Robert C. Culley, "Introduction," *Semeia* 62 (1993): vii. Robert C. Culley states that the idea of two volumes on "textual determinacy" grew out of his conversation with Robert Robinson.

reading always involves two worlds: a text and a reader. Readers cannot avoid bringing their preunderstanding to their reading of the text, and at the same time the text affects readers' reading.[11] Therefore, the above discussion shows the rationale for my hermeneutical emphasis in this study—both text-centred and reader-oriented.

With this dual emphasis, I clarify what approaches are being followed in the present study. First of all, this study is in its nature close to a metacommentary on the Esau story. By the term *metacommentary on the Esau story*, I mean a commentary on Genesis commentators' comments on the Esau story. In this study, I examine the contents of Genesis commentaries on the Esau-Jacob narrative[12] in order to reveal negative ideologies or assumptions embedded in Genesis commentators' writings about Esau under the guise of objective interpretation. David J. A. Clines, in his book *Interested Parties: The Ideology and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*,[13] states, "When we write commentary, we read what commentators say. When we write metacommentary, we notice what commentators do."[14] Similarly, what the present study aims for is to criticise how Genesis commentators have commented on the Esau story. Representative authors of representative commentaries on Genesis such as Claus Westermann, Gerhard von Rad, Hermann Gunkel, E. A. Speiser, John Skinner, Victor P. Hamilton, and

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[11]For further discussion, see Adele Berlin, "The Role of the Text in the Reading Process," *Semeia* 62 (1993): 143.

[12]In the present study, I will use the terms such as "Esau story", "Esau-Jacob story," "Esau-Jacob narrative", or "Esau narrative" in order to emphasise Esau.

[13]David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 205; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

[14]Clines, *Interested Parties*, 76. There is an earlier version of this essay in *Of Prophets' Visions and the Wisdom of Sages: Essays in Honour of R. Norman Whybray On His Seventieth Birthday* (ed. Heather A. Mckay and David J. A. Clines; JSOTSup 162; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 142–60.

Gordon J. Wenham[15] will be the main group of scholars that I will interact with, but the discussion will not be only restricted to commentaries. Scholars who have unfairly criticised Esau's speeches or deeds in other works will be also the group of scholars that I will criticise.

The reason why I focus on the Genesis commentaries is their impact for the readers. Bible commentaries have been used widely not only by biblical scholars but also by ordinary readers. They have often been regarded as having a level of scholarly authority among academics and non-academics. The status of Bible commentaries in biblical scholarship is extraordinary. In scholarly writings, we often advise our readers to "see the commentaries," using this phrase as a reference to professional scholarship that we could trust. My critique of Genesis commentaries is important because commentaries are one of the most widely used resources for Bible study by non-specialists or ordinary readers.[16] My study of commentaries written on the Esau-Jacob narrative will show how Genesis commentators bring their own negative ideologies and biased responses on Esau and stray from objective scholarship. I will argue that many Genesis commentators glorified those who are chosen by God but denigrated those who are not chosen by God.

Secondly, in the present study I will do a close reading of the Esau-Jacob narrative, giving my primary attention to Esau, and interpret the intrinsic

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[15]Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1972); Gunkel, *Genesis*; Speiser, *Genesis*; John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1910); Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*.

[16]For example, E. A. Speiser's Genesis commentary is most widely used commentary. With regard to E. A. Speiser's Genesis commentary, Nina Rulon-Miller comments, "First published by Doubleday in 1964, Speiser's "Genesis" was in its fifth printing in 1989. Between 1989 and 2001, 8,150 volumes were printed. Unfortunately, it is often the only commentary on Genesis to be found on the shelves of public libraries as well as on those of many secular colleges and universities." Quoted from the abstract of Nina Rulon-Miller's paper "Laughing with the Commentators in Genesis 17, 18, and 21" at SBL Annual Meeting in Washington DC. See page 314 of the *SBL Annual Meeting Abstracts 2006*.

ambiguities in several Esau texts *favourably and positively*. Esau's negative image constructed by Esau's interpreters has resulted from interpreters' negative evaluation of Esau's actions, speeches, or the narrator's comments. However, the intrinsic ambiguities in several Esau texts, which I will discuss in the present study, permit readers to reconstruct Esau's character in either positive or negative ways. The construction of Esau's image at some level depends on the readerly decision.[17] When an optimist sees the glass half-full, a pessimist tends to see the same glass half-empty. The same speeches or actions of a character can be interpreted totally differently according to the interpreters' attitudes toward a certain character. We have a number of interpretations of Esau which have adopted the "glass half-empty" approach. However, the "glass half-full" approach to Esau is rarely found in biblical scholarship. What the present study does is the glass half-full approach to Esau. Whenever ambiguity comes to the interpretation of the Esau story, this study will take the path of positive and favourable interpretation. Some of these interpretations may be regarded as defensive regarding Esau's speeches, actions, and the narrator's comments on Esau. However, contrary to contemporary Genesis commentators who have subjectively taken the path of interpreting negatively, the intent of this study is to show that reading Esau positively and favourably is also another way of reading the Esau story and arguably it is more plausible than the negative reading.

Therefore, the nature of my favourable reading of Esau could be regarded as a resistant reading or dissenting reading, because this reading often resists the overall plot development of Genesis which focuses on the Abrahamic line—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Reading the story of Jacob and

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[17]Cf. Scholars such as R. Christopher uses the term "readerly will" instead of "readerly decision." See R. Christopher Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection: Ambiguity in Genesis 12–36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 7.

Esau giving primary attention to Esau may be peculiar, because the majority of readers and scholars seem naturally to read the Esau-Jacob narrative focusing on Jacob. Where, then, is the story of Esau in Genesis 25-36? Is this story all about Jacob? As scholars such as Danna Nolan Fewell and R. Christopher Heard point out, it is common for most commentators to interpret the book of Genesis by primarily focusing on the major characters such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who are elected by God.[18] However, the weakness of this reading is to overlook the significance of other characters. As feminist critics such as J. Cheryl Exum, Phyllis Trible, and Sharon Pace Jeansonne have highlighted women characters such as Hagar, Sarah, Rebekah, and Potiphar's wife,[19] the present study will highlight Esau whom many Genesis scholars have not taken seriously as the subject for the biblical scholarship. There are also other scholars who have done a close reading of minor male characters in the book of Genesis. Unlike the mainstream Genesis scholars, scholars such as R. Christopher Heard and Roger Syrén have read the book of Genesis giving their primary attention to those who are *not* chosen by God and marginalised in the text.[20] Heard gives his attention to Lot, Ishmael, Esau and Laban in Genesis, while Syrén is interested in the forsaken firstborns – Ishmael, Esau, Reuben,

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[18]Thus, Heard points out that election in Genesis always seems to be accompanied by dis-election and that traditional commentaries thematise election from the perspective of those who are elected. see Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 3–4. Cf. Danna Nolan Fewell, "Imagination, Method, and Murder: Un/Framing the Face of Post-Exilic Israel," in *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies: Identity and the Book* (ed. Timothy K. Beal and David M. Gunn; London: Routledge, 1996), 137.

[19]See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Sharon P. Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993); J. Cheryl Exum, "The Mothers of Israel," in *Approaches to the Bible: The Best of Bible Review* (vol.2; ed. Harvey Minkoff; Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1995), 273-79.

[20]See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*; Roger Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born: A Study of a Recurrent Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives* (JSOTSup 133; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

and Manasseh. My reading of Esau has something in common with works of Heard and Syrén in that it does a close reading of the Esau story. However, the result of my reading Esau is far more positive and favourable than theirs. In their view, Esau still does not escape from his negative image.

Thirdly, employing rhetorical and narrative criticism, I will read the Esau-Jacob narrative in its final form[21] from a synchronic literary perspective. Until the rise of literary approaches in the 1980s, Old Testament scholarship was mostly focused on "the world behind the text."[22] Rather than focusing on the final form of the text, scholars have been preoccupied with the issues such as the origins of the text, authorship and date. Thus, Old Testament scholarship in the last two centuries has been dominated by form and source criticism, tending to dissect the text rather than consider its literary artistry within the narrative context. When I read the story of Esau and Jacob, however, my interest is neither sources nor historical clues from the text. I read it as a *story*. My interest is on how characters in that story are born, grow up, change, develop, and act on each other. Yet, most representative commentaries on Genesis do not apply the tool of narrative analysis to the Esau-Jacob narrative as a whole and do not approach it as a story.[23] Although historical-critical approaches to the book of Genesis have been valuable in understanding the compositional history of the text and identifying its background, this

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[21]Among variant textual traditions of the book of Genesis, I take the Masoretic Text as my primary source of reading. However, it does not automatically mean that I consider the Masoretic Text the best textual tradition for reading of all Esau-Jacob narrative. My preference for the Masorectic reading is simply a pragmatic option, because it is used widely among biblical scholars.

[22]"The world behind the text" is used as a common metaphor to refer to author-centered approach among biblical scholars. Cf. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, xx.

[23]There are several recent commentaries which apply narrative analysis to the book as a whole. For example, see David W. Cotter, *Genesis* (Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003); Waltke, *Genesis*. However, this kind of Genesis commentaries are relatively less than Genesis commentaries which apply historical approaches.

method has not been helpful in understanding how the text presently stands in relation to the narrative context. As my primary concern in the present study is to do a close reading of the Esau story and re-evaluate the image of Esau primarily manipulated by Genesis scholars and commentators, historical-critical methods are not directly relevant to the scope of this study. Rhetorical and narrative analysis of the Esau-Jacob narrative is more valuable than the historical-critical methods in terms of understanding texts as *texts* (or stories as *stories*).

Having first been introduced by James Muilenburg,[24] rhetorical criticism is a relatively recent methodology for the textual study of the Hebrew Bible. Rhetorical analysis of a passage is an invaluable tool in order to understand the textual questions on the Esau-Jacob narrative. Careful analysis of the repetition of words, phrases, and structure often shows where the narrator's emphasis is in the Esau narrative. Using rhetorical analysis as a preliminary step, my reading of the Esau narrative also involves narrative analysis. The general features of all narratives, including biblical narrative, are plot, theme, motif, characterisation, time, setting, and point of view. From my understanding of narrative criticism, narrative critics approach and analyse the text in terms of these narrative features.[25] David M. Gunn defines narrative criticism as "close reading that identifies formal and conventional structures of

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[24]For further discussion on rhetorical criticism, see James Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969): 1–18. Cf. B. W. Anderson, "The New Frontier of Rhetorical Criticism," in *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (ed. Jared Judd Jackson and Martin Kessler; Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series 1; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1974), ix-xviii; I. M. Kikawada, "Some Proposals for the Definition of Rhetorical Criticism," *Semitics* 5 (1977): 67–91; W. Wuellner, "Where Is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?" *CBQ* 49 (1987): 448–63.

[25]Several scholarly works focus on analysing these narrative features. For example, Adele Berlin's *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* focuses on analysing characterisation and point of view from various texts. Laurence A. Turner analyses the plot of Genesis in his book, *Announcement of Plot in Genesis*. Cf. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994); Laurence A. Turner, *Announcements of Plot in Genesis* (JSOTSup 95; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).

the narrative, determines plot, develops characterisation, distinguishes point of view, exposes language play, and relates all to some overarching, encapsulating theme."[26] There could be different definitions on narrative-critical reading, but my understanding of the term "narrative criticism" is close to Gunn's notion.

For the last three decades, scholarly interest in the Hebrew narrative and its techniques has been gradually increasing. Scholars such as Robert Alter, Shimon Bar-Efrat, Adele Berlin, Meir Steinberg, Jan P. Fokkelman, David M. Gunn, and Danna N. Fewell[27] have contributed to the trend of viewing the Hebrew Bible as literature along with its deliberately organised literary art. Poetic devices used in ancient Hebrew narrative are not easily recognisable for contemporary readers, but I attempt to read the Esau narrative as a reader who is able to identify various Hebrew narrative techniques by drawing on the best insights of scholarly research into these techniques. Reading the Esau narrative from a synchronic literary perspective, however, does not necessarily mean that I will completely neglect insights of historical-critical scholars. A large part of this study is based on a synchronic literary analysis of the Esau-Jacob narrative, but I occasionally interact with scholarly works which have often interpreted the story of Esau and Jacob as an etiological story of Edom and Israel.

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[26]David M. Gunn, "Narrative Criticism," in *To Each Its Own Meaning: Biblical Criticism and Their Application* (ed. Steven L. Mckenzie; Stephen R Haynes; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 201.

[27]See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTSup 70; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989); Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975); Danna Nolan Fewell and David M Gunn, *Narrative Art in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford Bible Series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Finally, utilising reader response criticism, I will bring my ethical, cultural and social perspectives for a reading of Esau in this study. Interpretation of the biblical text is inevitably influenced by a reader's various perspectives. A reader's ethical, cultural, and social perspectives play an important role in the process of "meaning-making." Without a reader, a text is meaningless. If a text is not read by a reader, this text conveys no meaning. My experiences and perspectives as a reader are different from those of other biblical critics. I was born in Korea of Korean parents and educated in the Korean education system up to age 26, but since then I have been living in a self-imposed diaspora for the past 6 years in Canada and England. Socio-cultural settings in my life must have given some influence on my thinking. James E. Massey, in his article "Reading the Bible from Particular Social Locations: Introduction", emphasises the importance of the social perspectives of the interpreter in the process of interpreting the Bible. Massey comments:

> We need to recognize and appreciate how the differing social communities within the larger society have given us not only our identities but also our different perspectives on Scripture. Those perspectives become evident when we speak from within the experiences shaped by our social locations. That is, particular approaches to Bible reading have been influenced by differing social locations. African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and women of various ethnic backgrounds read and interpret the Bible from a set of understandings influenced by a history of experience as members of a particular social community.[28]

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[28]See James Earl Massey, "Reading the Bible from Particular Social Locations: An Introduction," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 1; ed. Leander E. Keck; Nashiville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 150. For further discussion about social location and biblical interpretation, see Fernando F. Segovia and Marry Ann Tolbert, eds, *Reading from This Place: Vol. 2 Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Tat-siong Benny Liew and Gale A. Yee, eds., "The Bible in Asian America," *Semeia* 90/91 (2002).

As Massey points out, people from various ethnic backgrounds read and interpret the Bible with their particular understandings influenced by their experiences. My background as an Asian — more specifically, a Korean who has been away from his home country and gained education in biblical studies from two Western countries — has also affected the way in which I read the Bible in many ways. From my own experience, living and studying in foreign countries gave me more interest in biblical characters who live in a foreign land as an alien. Social locations that I have experienced therefore affected my particular interest in the Bible. Accordingly, insights gained from my ethnic, cultural and social perspectives will be reflected in this study.

My social locations, however, are not only limited to geographic locations that I belong to. As a biblical scholar in training, I also belong to a reader group who has religious beliefs in the Bible yet is also engaged in academic biblical studies. Despite a common confession as Christians, this kind of reader group does not approach the Bible as most believers read the Bible — simply accepting all the words in the Bible literally without asking questions. Unlike professional biblical scholars who do not belong to any community of faith and approach the Bible without a faith perspective, this group regards the Bible as authorative text and holds a faith perspective consciously and unconsciously in their writings. From my standpoint, the biblical text like the Esau story is not simply a production of ancient literary art to be appreciated but a foundational document that also needs to be used within communities of faith. Rather than leaving the Esau story to be interpreted without considering what it teaches for communities of faith today, I will also reflect on how the story of Esau could be re-applied to common beliefs in my community of faith.[29] Therefore, my criticism of Genesis

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[29]I belong to Korean Presbyterian Church.

commentators' negative reading of Esau often reflects my own criticism of the common negative teaching and preaching about Esau (or favourable teaching and preaching about Jacob) in my community of faith, which are more than likely to be affected by Genesis commentators' negative comments on Esau.

In the present study, I seek to bring out the above reading strategies synergically. As already implied above, this study does not eagerly pursue historical reconstruction of the events narrated in the Esau-Jacob narrative. Instead, the main interests of the present study are ideologies that can be gleaned from the Esau-Jacob narrative and contemporary Genesis scholars' writings. Most Genesis scholars have understood that the Genesis text delivers negative ideologies toward Esau to the readers, but this study will show that the ideologies toward Esau are not that negative. Although we could get information about our contemporary Genesis scholars, we do not know much about who the Genesis author was and what kind of audience or readers this author had in mind. The questions about the authorship and first audience of the Esau-Jacob narrative will be not discussed in the present study.[30]

Plan of the Present Study

My plan for the rest of this study is to discuss and re-evaluate the image of Esau chapter by chapter in Genesis. After a review of previous interpretations of Esau, I will read the Esau story closely, giving my primary attention to Esau and often comparing him with Jacob. I will show

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[30]I take the position that the narrator himself (or herself) can be regarded as the first audience or the readers in a real sense, because no narrator or writer can avoid the process of reading his or her own work. David Rosenberg, in his introductory article on *Genesis as It Is Written: Contemporary Writers on Our First Stories*, suggests that the first readers of the book of Genesis were most likely writers themselves learned in languages and scripts at the Davidic or Solomonic courts in the 10th century BCE. There could be debates on the date, but I think that taking writers as first readers is insightful. For further discussion, see David Rosenberg, "Introduction: As It Is Written" in *Genesis as It is Written: Contemporary Writers on Our First Stories* (ed. David Rosenberg; New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 7.

interpretative possibilities for Esau caused by intrinsic ambiguities in the narrator's storytelling and criticise how Genesis commentators and scholars have taken the path of interpreting Esau unfavourably or negatively. Alternatively, I will suggest more positive and favourable reading of Esau. Attention to negative interpretation of the Esau story in Genesis commentaries including other scholarly writings and my alternative reading of Esau's speeches, actions, and the narrator's comments on Esau will be the core of the present study.

In chapter one, a review of literature, I will mainly review previous interpretations of Esau and criticise their bias against Esau. From chapter two, the present study will cover the Esau story according to its narrative sequence. In chapter two, I will deal with the divine oracle about Esau's birth, Esau's outward appearances, his skills as a hunter, and the sale of his birthright (Gen. 25:19-34). Chapter three will deal with Esau's marriage to the Hittite women and the daughter of Ishmael (Gen. 26:34-35; Gen. 28:6-9). Discussion in chapter four will primarily involve the nature of Isaac's blessing for Esau and compare it with several blessings given to Jacob (Gen. 27:27-29; 28:1-4; 32:29; 35:9-12). Chapter five is devoted for highlighting Esau as more appealing, humane, and honourable patriarch than any other patriarch in Genesis. This chapter will discuss Esau's leadership, lordship over Jacob, forgiving Jacob, Esau's face as God's face, and the nature of his reunion with Jacob. In chapter six, I will deal with Esau's genealogical information in Genesis 36. Discussion will mainly cover the significance of Esau's migration to Seir, Esau's genealogy, and the list of Edomite kings.

Finally, I will conclude the present study with a summary of the main arguments. Realising that the scope of this research and its methodologies (metacommentating, text-resisting, reader response, and so forth) will cover

some crucial — but not all — aspects of interpreting the Esau story, I will end by reflecting on other interpretative options and potentials for further research along this line of research. The ultimate purposes of the present study are: (1) to criticise and re-evaluate the traditional negative image of Esau, (2) provide a favourable and positive image of Esau, and (3) to suggest a research agenda toward studies in the characterisations of minor male characters in the book of Genesis.

As to the English translations of the Hebrew text which occur in the present study, I will take an eclectic approach, sometimes selecting the suitable translation for each verse and sometimes providing my own translation in order to reflect the ambiguity of the Hebrew and to counter the influence of the bias against Esau even by biblical translators.

Chapter 1
Esau's Interpreters

Before offering a new and favourable reading of Esau, examining the work of previous interpreters of Esau and giving due reason for a new reading will be necessary. The purpose of this literature review chapter is to present the various types of interpreters of Esau, disclose the limitations and pitfalls of their reading strategies, and then provide a rationale for a new reading of Esau. First of all, exemplary negative readings of the Esau texts in representative Genesis commentaries will be briefly introduced here and be discussed further as this study goes on chapter by chapter. Secondly, I will review previous scholarly approaches to the Esau-Jacob narrative. Finally, I will discuss Esau's interpreters in the biblical and extra-biblical texts.

1. Examples of Negative Readings against Esau in Genesis Commentaries

A certain type of negativity prevails in contemporary Genesis commentators' reading of Esau. As the number of commentaries on the book of Genesis is enormous, I have selected several representative Genesis commentators in order to show the scholarly tendency to consider primarily the bad side of Esau's character. There could be different opinions about which commentators should be selected, but the following are incontestably benchmarks in modern commentary on Genesis: Claus Westermann, Hermann Gunkel, Gerhard von Rad, E. A Speiser, John Skinner, Gordon J. Wenham, Victor P. Hamilton, and Nahum M. Sarna. Their works are widely used and referred to in many Genesis commentaries. These works have been influential in Genesis scholarship, but the interpretations they suggest reflects negative attitudes and perceptions about Esau as a "non-elect" character. Most of their

negative interpretations involve Esau's speeches, actions, or the narrator's comments on Esau. Here are such examples and my brief comments on them. As their works are often quoted by each other, I have listed one of them if they overlap.

1) Esau's Birth, Lifestyle or the Divine Oracle concerning Esau

> As they grew up, the boys lived completely separated from each other, for they personified two ways of life typical for Palestine, which at that time was more wooded: that of the hunter and that of the shepherd. . . From the viewpoint of cultural history the hunter is, of course, the older; the shepherd appeared only after a certain deforestation and working of the soil . . . The hunter, in contrast to the shepherd with his much more economic and careful way of life, often does not have enough to eat. If he takes on prey, he goes hungry.[31] (von Rad)

> The contrasted types of civilisation — Jacob the shepherd and Esau the hunter — were firmly fixed in the popular mind; and the supremacy of the former was an obvious corollary.[32] (Skinner)

> And what is said about them here, particularly in the prophetic oracle [Gen. 25:23], "The older will be a slave of the younger," will determine their whole career.[33] (Wenham)

Many Genesis commentators have assumed that Esau is characterised as inferior to Jacob by the divine oracle. Wenham's translation shows an even stronger implication: Esau will be a *slave* of Jacob. However, the Hebrew text of Gen. 25:23, which I will discuss in chapter two in detail, is ambiguous and

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[31]von Rad, *Genesis*, 265–66.

[32]Skinner, *Genesis*, 361.

[33]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 179.

it does not clearly indicate that the older will be a slave of the younger. Most English translations read the last part of Gen. 25:23 as "the older will serve the younger", but there are also several difficulties in taking this translation for granted. As shown by the above examples, Esau is often understood as representing the lifestyle of hunter and several commentators such as John Skinner have regarded this lifestyle as inferior to the lifestyle that Jacob represents — a shepherd.[34] This too is a questionable opposition, as is the implied evaluation.

2) Esau Selling the Birthright

> He does not even know what Jacob is preparing; it is possible he never had seen its like before, or there may be another reason. He refers to it in a few clumsy words and unconsciously caricatures his own name (*'ādōm*, "red" — *'edōm*); he wants to "gulp it down." But the situation can be understood differently. Perhaps Esau did know the red pottage, i.e., he considered it a "blood soup" and is greatly deceived when he finds it to be only a dish of lentils (D. Daube, Studies in Biblical Law, 191ff). Esau's subsequent assertion that he was deceived by Jacob twice (ch. 27.36) supports this interpretation.[35] (von Rad)

> The birthright has been transferred from Esau to Jacob. This means that, although Esau-Edom is the older people, it is now far inferior to its brother Jacob-Israel in might and wealth.[36] (Gunkel)

> Esau's answer reveals the sensual nature of the man: the remoter good is sacrificed to the passing necessity of the moment, which his ravenous appetite leads him to exaggerate. הֹלֵךְ לָמוּת does not mean 'exposed to death sooner or later' (IEz. Di. al.), but 'at the point of

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[34]Similarly, von Rad takes this lifestyle of hunter as "less economic" than the lifestyle of shepherd. See von Rad, *Genesis*, 266.

[35]von Rad, *Genesis*, 266.

[36]Gunkel, *Genesis*, 292–3.

> death now.' The climax of the story is Esau's unconcern even when he discovers that he has bartered the birthright for such a trifle as a dish of lentil soup.[37] (Skinner)

> But with callous calculation, Jacob insists that Esau exchange his firstborn's inheritance rights for the stew, that he should surrender precious long-term goods for the immediate appeasement of his hunger. Amazingly, Esau consents, and Jacob acquired the firstborn's right of inheritance. Already the elder is becoming slave of the younger . . .
> Hebrews thus sees Esau as a type of the backslider or unbeliever. So does Paul in his use of the key verse . . .[38] (Wenham)

The incident in which Esau sells his birthright to Jacob is one of the most frequently criticised actions of Esau. Regarding the scene where Esau sells his birthright, Genesis commentators have assumed that the narrator portrays Esau as a stupid person who does not even know the right word for the lentil stew. They have often interpreted Esau as being impulsive and having no concern about his future legacy. In relation to the New Testament writings, Esau is also understood as a type of the unbeliever by Genesis commentators. However, the implied contrast with Jacob can be questioned: does he really come out as morally superior to Esau? Need we read Esau's motives and language so negatively?

3) Esau's Character

> The picture of Esau which the Jacob story draws—a coarse, butchering, Edomite hunter—is, upon closer inspection, filled with tensions; and when we investigate the historical and traditional

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[37]Skinner, *Genesis*, 362.

[38]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 179–80.

> background of this picture, we raise questions that can be answered only conjecturally.[39] (von Rad)

> Esau is depicted as an uncouth glutton; he speaks of "swallowing, gulping down," instead of eating, or the like.[40] (Speiser)

> In order to make this unequal trade comprehensible, the legend employs as a motif the characteristic difference of two types — the hunter and the shepherd. The hunter lives from hand to mouth. He slays the animal he finds. He often returns home exhausted and without prey and must then go hungry. Today, however, he has something to eat, so he does not think of tomorrow (cf. Holzinger, 179) . . .
> . . . He wants to "gulp down" "the red stuff, the red stuff there" (more precisely "the brown stuff, the brown stuff"). Why does he not name the lintel soup by name? He probably does not know that they are lintels. (Or did he forget the name in his hunger? . . .).[41]
> (Gunkel, 291)

Genesis commentators have written negatively about Esau's character. They have assumed that the Genesis text has portrayed Esau as a cruel, coarse and uncivilised person. As shown by Gunkel's comments, Esau is also understood as a person who thinks of the moment only, not tomorrow or the future. Genesis commentators' comments on Esau's character have been primarily deduced from his image as a hunter in the narrative. However, here von Rad raises at least a doubt as to where these images come from.[42]

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[39]von Rad, *Genesis*, 275.

[40]Speiser, *Genesis*, 195.

[41]Gunkel, *Genesis*, 291.

[42]Nevertheless, the description of Esau as a *coarse*, *butchering*, Edomite hunter still shows von Rad's negative interpretation of Esau as a hunter.

4) Esau's Marriages with Foreign Wives

> But once we realize that neither Esau nor Isaac care about Abraham's principle of not marrying Canaanites, we cannot entirely condemn the way Jacob and Rebekah achieve their goals. Esau's indifference to the law's demands, which Abraham held so dear, suggests that perhaps he does not deserve to inherit Abraham's blessing . . .
> . . . What their Hittite daughters-in-law did to make life so miserable for Isaac and Rebekah is left unclarified, but already some of the costs of Isaac's indifference and Esau's rebelliousness are becoming apparent.[43] (Wenham)

> At the same time, the passage reinforces the idea of Esau's unworthiness to be Isaac's heir, for he commits a threefold offence: breaking with social convention by contracting the marriage himself rather than leaving the initiative to his parents; abandoning the established practice of endogamy by marrying outside the kinship group; and violating the honor of his clan by intermarrying with the native women.[44] (Sarna)

Esau's marriage has been often understood by Genesis commentators as showing Esau's unsuitability to become Isaac's heir or inherit Abraham's blessing. As shown by Wenham's comments, Genesis commentators accuse Esau of ignoring his family tradition of not marrying Canaanites. With this incident of inter-marriage, Wenham defends the trickery of Rebekah and Jacob against Isaac and Esau. But is Esau actually at fault here?

5) Isaac's Blessing Given to Esau

> The fertile land, watered by dew and rain, is denied Esau, almost the same words being deliberately used: the מן is partitive in the first case

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[43]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 205.

[44]Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 189.

[in Jacob's case], but privative here. The words, " . . . shall be your dwelling," affirm that one can live in the steppe also. Considerations along the lines that Edom is not just a desert, barren land are unnecessary; the intention is to present merely the opposite of the blessing on Jacob.[45] (Westermann)

His second "blessing" is, to be sure, the opposite of what Jacob received. Its effect is especially bitter because it begins with almost the same words. The contrasting meaning is expressed only by the different syntactic use of one and the same preposition, which cannot be duplicated in English. (The *min* in v. 28 is partitive, i.e., in the sense of "a part of," that in v. 39, however, is privative, in the sense of "away from," "far from.") The stony Edomite mountain region can scarcely be cultivated. The sense of the saying is that a livelihood is possible there for the roving hunter almost alone of men.[46] (von Rad)

Moved by love and compassion, Isaac would like to bless. But the world has been given away. Nothing remains for Esau other than — curse . . . Esau's land was considered, then, to be very infertile, a view which is, however, seen objectively, not absolutely correct for the land of Edom (Palmer, *Wüstenwanderung Israels*, 334-35). "To live by the sword," that is, to live as a robber, from murder and theft, is the fate of the younger brother who does not want to submit to the elder, of the illegitimate son rejected by his relatives, of refugees who leave the safety of home and seek their bread out on the steppe with all manner of suspicious riffraff.[47] (Gunkel)

Esau is being condemned to a wandering existence like Cain or Ishmael, haunting the dry wilderness to the south and east of Canaan. And certainly the traditional area of Edom southeast of the Dead Sea is much more arid than the land of Israel.[48] (Wenham)

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[45]Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 443.

[46]von Rad, *Genesis*, 279.

[47]Gunkel, *Genesis*, 306.

[48]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 212.

> For Esau is not to enjoy the degree of agricultural fertility that is coming to his brother. He will receive neither his father's blessing, nor heaven's dew, nor earth's fatness. In addition, Esau is consigned to living like a predator: *By your sword* you shall live (i.e., an existence by war and plunder). But the possession of this sword will not give him domination over his brother—Jacob will never be among his victims.[49] (Hamilton)

Most Genesis commentators have regarded Isaac's blessing for Esau (Gen. 27:39-40) as a curse. Relating Isaac's blessing for Esau to Edom or the region of Edom, they have assumed that Esau will live in an infertile land. They have also understood this blessing as predicting Esau's wandering lifestyle as a robber or predator. Although the phrase "living by the sword" is only used here in the Hebrew Bible and its meaning is not clear, Genesis commentators simply interpreted it negatively in relation to Esau. However, this is a notorious crux in the Hebrew and much turns on the interpretation of the prepositions in the verse. As we shall see, other constructions can be put on this. Once more, the point is that rather than deriving their view of Esau's character from a fair appraisal of the different interpretative options in this verse, commentators use a preconceived view of Esau to disambiguate the Hebrew.

6) Esau's Reunion with Jacob

> The shepherd, with all his success, is at the mercy of the fierce marauder who was to 'live by his sword' (27[40]).[50] (Skinner)

> Was Esau's purpose friendly from the first, or was he turned from thoughts of vengeance by Jacob's submissive and flattering

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[49]Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 228.

[50]Skinner, *Genesis*, 406.

> demeanour? Does the writer regard the reconciliation as equally honourable to both parties, or does he only admire the skill and knowledge of human nature with which Jacob tames his brother's ferocity? The truth probably lies between two extremes. That Esau's intention was hostile, and that Jacob gained a diplomatic victory over him, cannot reasonably be doubted.[51] (Skinner)

> Instead, the old legend will have portrayed Esau as a good-natured buffoon who can be won over by beautiful speeches and gifts. This concept of Esau appears somewhat more clearly in the second part of the passage (vv 12ff.).[52] (Gunkel)

Although Esau shows warm attitudes toward Jacob when he meets his deceitful brother Jacob again, several Genesis commentators still doubt the genuine intention of Esau. Commentators such as Gunkel and Skinner suggest a possibility that Esau's intention toward Jacob was hostile at first but he was bought off by Jacob's beautiful speeches and magnificent gifts. What is their justification for such suspicions of Esau's motives and intellect? If anyone in the story is demonstrably untrustworthy in their dealings, surely it is Jacob.

7) Esau's Genealogy or Leaving the Land of Canaan

> After David had subdued Edom it was necessary for the purpose of administration to have as exact knowledge as possible of the land and the people, a knowledge which included the history as well . . . The origin and transmission of Gen. 36 and its three parts is to be understood from its "setting in life," the task of administering a conquered land.[53] (Westermann)

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[51]Skinner, *Genesis*, 412.

[52]Gunkel, *Genesis*, 354.

[53]Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 561.

> Like Lot before him, he decided that he could not live in Canaan with his brother Jacob, because "their possessions were too numerous for them" (36:7). As chap. 34 showed, there was plenty of space in Canaan for Jacob and others to live together. But Esau felt otherwise, and his decision to leave Canaan could ultimately prove as calamitous as Lot's similar decision.[54] (Wenham)

As shown by Westermann's comments, Esau's genealogical information in Genesis 36 has been understood as useful information for Israel—not as significant information about Esau's descendants. The story of Esau's migration to Seir in Genesis 36 has been also understood negatively. The narrative does not clearly indicate the reason why Esau, not Jacob, has left the land of Canaan, but Genesis commentators assume that it was caused by Esau's own greed, not by the capacity of the land of Canaan. As we shall see, there is a good deal more to be derived from a careful scrutiny of these verses which may put the matter in a different perspective.

The above examples show that negative interpretations of Esau prevail in these Genesis commentaries. Genesis commentators have not interpreted all aspects of Esau's speeches or actions entirely negatively, but there is no doubt that a negative bias against Esau exists in their commentaries. Although this study cannot cover all Genesis commentaries published in English, listing of several representative commentators' comments on Esau already demonstrates that this negativity toward Esau would exist in other Genesis commentaries. The rest of this study will also cover negative readings of Esau in other Genesis commentaries.

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[54]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 341.

2. Esau's Interpreters in Contemporary Commentary

It is not my intention to provide the reader with all the negative readings of Esau in contemporary literature but the existence of this bias is, I submit, undeniable. In order to understand the origins of this bias in the scholarly treatment of Esau's portrayal in the Esau-Jacob narrative, it is useful to examine the current scholarship on the characterisations in Genesis in general and traditional approaches to the Esau-Jacob narrative.

First of all, according to my survey of literature, no monograph has been written extensively on the narrative portrait of Esau in the Esau-Jacob story. Esau is a character who is not chosen by most biblical scholars for academic purposes. Most literary studies on the book of Genesis have focused on the patriarchs who are chosen by God. Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph have been favourite subjects for those who approach the book of Genesis from a literary perspective.[55] Female characters or minor male characters who are *not* chosen by God (e.g. Lot, Ishmael, and Esau) have relatively drawn less attention from scholars. Several feminist critics like Phyllis Trible, Sharon Pace Jeansonne, and Cheryl Exum have already attempted to highlight female characters such as Hagar, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, or Potiphar's wife from literary perspectives.[56] However, the literary studies on the dis-elected or

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[55]See T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002). T. Desmond Alexander, "A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative" (Ph.D. Thesis; Queen's University of Belfast, 1982); Yiu-Wing Fung, *Victim and Victimizer: Joseph's Interpretation of His Destiny* (JSOTSup. 308; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*; Serge Frolov, "The Other Side of the Jabbok: Genesis 32 as a Fiasco of Patriarchy," *JSOT* 91 (2000): 41–59; Victor H. Matthews, "Jacob the Trickster and Heir of Covenant: A Literary Interpretation," *PRSt* 12 (1985): 185–95; Peter D. Miscall, "The Jacob and Joseph Stories as Analogies," *JSOT* 6 (1978): 28–40; Allen P. Ross, "Jacob's Vision: The Founding of Bethel," *BSac* 142 (1985): 224–37.

[56]See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Sharon P. Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993); J. Cheryl Exum, "The Mothers of Israel," in *Approaches to the Bible: The Best of Bible*

forsaken firstborns in the book of Genesis are still scarce. Only a few scholars such as R. Christopher Heard and Roger Syrén have attempted to read the patriarchal story focusing on those who are *not* chosen by God and therefore are marginalised in the text.[57] Consequently, in spite of the vast amount of literature written on the Esau-Jacob narrative, there are not many scholars who have attempted to read and interpret the Esau-Jacob narrative, giving their primary attention on Esau.[58]

Secondly, the traditional approach to the Esau-Jacob narrative has not offered many relevant ideas for my research interest in the narrative portrayal of Esau. By the term "traditional", I mean historical critical approaches such as source-critical and form-critical consideration of the narrative which many prominent Genesis commentators such as Gerhard von Rad, Hermann Gunkel, Claus Westermann, and E. A. Speiser use extensively in their commentaries. This approach has been more interested in the historical clues that can be derived from the text. From this perspective, the story of Esau and Jacob has been understood as the etiology for Edom and Israel. Part of my argument in the present study will be that this is not a necessary way of reading the story, and indeed may be misleading.

However, as we have seen, commentators on Genesis do provide characterisation of Esau in their more general discussions. How then can we construct the narrative portrait of Esau from a literary perspective? In narrative

Review (vol.2; ed. Harvey Minkoff; Washington: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1995), 273-79.

[57]See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*; Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born.*

[58]Some may challenge my interest on Esau, asking "Is it necessary to read the Esau-Jacob story focusing on Esau?" Reading the Esau-Jacob story focusing on Esau may not be a normal way of reading that story, but it is worthy because the stereotyped view of Esau as a negative or insignificant character has obscured or undermined the positive and favourable portraits of Esau by focusing on Jacob.

theory,[59] generally speaking, the character of Esau is constructed through his actions, speeches and the narrator's comments.[60] The way in which other characters view Esau within the narrative is also helpful in understanding the characterisation of Esau. As I have previously mentioned, Esau's negative image constructed by Esau's interpreters are mainly from interpreters' negative evaluation of Esau's actions, speeches, or the narrator's comments. However, the intrinsic ambiguities in several Esau texts allow readers to reconstruct Esau's character in either positive or negative ways. As far as I know, no one has ever attempted to take the most positive reading of Esau in these texts and then go on to construct his character.

As examples of these ambiguous texts, we can take the divine oracle given to Rebekah (Gen. 25:23)[61] and Isaac's blessing for Esau (Gen. 27:39-40).[62] As we have seen above, a representative sample of commentators takes it for granted in most cases that these narratives are evidence of a negative attitude to Esau on the part of the narrator and author(s) of Genesis. Such ambiguous texts are crucial elements in understanding Esau's narrative role

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[59]The storyteller of the Hebrew Bible shows various ways to effect characterisation. Robert Alter, in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, suggests the following: report of actions, appearance, gesture, posture, costume, one character's comment on another, direct speech by characters, inward speech, narrator's statement. See Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 116. Cf. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction* (London: Routedle, 1983), 67; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 47–92; Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 74–92; Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 23–42.

[60]A character's motivation, however, cannot be completely deduced from their actions or speeches. There is still a possibility that a character's actions and speeches could conceal his or her real motive. As the deception motif prevails in the Esau-Jacob narrative, it is therefore important to investigate and re-evaluate a character's words and deeds carefully in the whole narrative.

[61]Gen. 25:23 reads: And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples shall be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger." (NASB)

[62]Gen. 27:39-40 reads: Then Isaac his father answered and said to him, "Behold, away from the fertility of the earth shall be your dwelling, And away from the dew of heaven from above. And by your sword you shall live, And your brother you shall serve; But it shall come about when you become restless, That you shall break his yoke from your neck." (NASB)

within the Esau-Jacob story. However, they have almost universally been understood either as portraying Esau's narrative role negatively or as having nothing to do with Esau at an individual level.

For first-time readers, the divine oracle and Isaac's blessings for Esau and Jacob encourage readers to pay attention to when and how this oracle and the blessings will be fulfilled within the narrative. This oracle and Isaac's blessings for Esau and Jacob cast their influence over the entire Esau-Jacob story. Laurence A. Turner, in his book *Announcements of Plot in Genesis*, points out that the divine oracle to Rebekah (Gen. 25:23) and Isaac's blessings on Jacob (Gen. 27:27-29) and Esau (Gen. 27:39-40) are important plot announcements.[63] Current scholarship has produced a wide range of views as to the significance of these key passages in the Esau-Jacob story. As this provides evidence of the assumptions behind the traditional scholarly understanding of Esau's role in the Esau-Jacob story, I will discuss them here.

Story about the Two Nations? or Story about the Two Brothers?

> *And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples shall be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger." (Gen. 25:23 NASB)*

Historical critics, including S. R. Driver, John Skinner, Gerhard von Rad, and Claus Westermann, have related the divine oracle (Gen. 25:23) or Isaac's blessings (Gen. 27:27-29, 39-40) exclusively to the political relationship between Israel and Edom, and to Israel's superiority over Edom

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[63]Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 115.

(hence, Jacob's superiority over Esau).[64] For example, Driver assumes that the future which Gen. 25:23 predicts is not the future of Jacob and Esau, but of Israel and Edom.[65] Von Rad interprets the blessing given to Jacob (Gen. 27:27-29) as indicating the political superiority of Israel over Edom.[66] Similarly, Skinner argues that the blessing here does not deal with the personal history of Jacob but the great future of Israel.[67] Westermann also asserts that Gen. 27:27-29, 39-40 do not have their origin together with the narrative context, and that Isaac's blessings in Gen. 27:27-29, 39-40 refer not to Jacob and Esau, but to the later tribes.[68] As reviewed briefly, these Genesis commentators insist that the divine oracle and Isaac's blessings are solely related to the political relationship between Edom and Israel. They have not given their attention to how and to what degree the oracle and Isaac's blessing for Esau could be related to Esau's narrative role. Their political interpretations of the oracle and Isaac's blessings have their limitations, because, as Frank Crüsemann points out, the political aspects of the Esau-Jacob story have hardly been applied to the *whole* Esau-Jacob narrative.[69] Crüsemann does not explicitly mention why this has happened and what the consequences of doing this would be, but I suggest that the difficulties here seem to be caused by the account of Esau's reunion with Jacob in Genesis 32

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[64]For further discussion, see Skinner, *Genesis*, 356–7; Claus Westermann, *The Promises to the Fathers: Studies on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 80–1; John R. Bartlett, "The Brotherhood of Edom," *JSOT* 4 (1977): 19; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 412; S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen & Co, 1904), 247.

[65]Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 247.

[66]von Rad, *Genesis*, 278.

[67]Skinner, *Genesis*, 371.

[68]Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 436, 441.

[69]See Frank Crüsemann, "Dominion, Guilt, and Reconciliation: The Contribution of the Jacob Narrative in Genesis to Political Ethics," *Semeia* 66 (1995): 70. According to Crüsemann, Blum's work is exceptional. See Erhard Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte* (WMANT 57; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984).

and 33. In the scene where Jacob meets Esau again, Jacob is portrayed as humiliating himself such as calling Esau as lord (Gen. 32:4, 5, 18; Gen. 33:8, 13, 14) and bowing down seven times before Esau (Gen. 33:3). If one interprets this incident politically, it would imply Edom's subjugation of Israel. Therefore, it is not easy for scholars to relate this scene to the historical situation between Edom and Israel.

While many historical critics have interpreted the oracle and Isaac's blessings politically, scholars such as David W. Cotter, Walter Brueggemann, and Laurence A. Turner[70] are not eager to support the idea that Gen. 25:23 or Gen. 27:27-29, 39-40 are exclusively related to the political relationship between Israel and Edom. Gen. 25:23 mentions גּוֹיִם (*nations*) and לְאֻמִּם (*peoples*), but in the narrative context they have related this divine oracle to Esau and Jacob as two individuals. For example, Brueggemann states that the oracle of inversion in Gen. 25:23 may not be simply a political scheme of preference for Israel over Edom. Brueggemann is more concerned about *God* who discloses Himself through the divine oracle in the Jacob-Esau story.[71] Turner's view is that "two nations" can imply the twins and that "one is to be stronger" (Gen. 25:23) can denote Esau's hairiness in the narrative. Furthermore, he points out that "division between the two of them" can also relate to Jacob and Esau as individuals: "Jacob holding Esau's heel suggesting rivalry; Esau is a hunter, Jacob is a domestic individual; the presence of parental favouritism."[72] Focusing on the final form of the text, Turner insists that the divine oracle and Isaac's blessings are meant to have an influence from the point they were announced in the narrative, with reference to Jacob

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[70]See Cotter, *Genesis*, 188–9, 202–4; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 209; Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 117.

[71]Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 209.

[72]Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 117.

and Esau as individuals, and to the extension of the future of their descendants in national and political aspects.[73] Therefore, Turner understands the divine oracle and Isaac's blessings as including the future of Israel and Edom but not necessarily excluding Jacob and Esau as individuals.

Although historical critics have restricted the oracle and Isaac's blessing given to Esau exclusively to the political or national level, Turner has given a rationale for interpreting them in relation to Esau at the individual level. According to Turner, Isaac's dialogue with Esau in Gen. 27:36-37 reminds readers that the blessing deceitfully gained by Jacob is intended to cast its power over the lives of *Jacob* and *Esau*:[74] "Behold, I have made him [Jacob] your lord, and all his brothers I have given to him for servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son [Esau]?" (Gen. 27:37 RSV) Isaac here mentions the lives of *Jacob* and *Esau* first—neither Edom and Israel nor the descendants of Esau and Jacob are mentioned explicitly. Therefore, the influence of the divine oracle and Isaac's blessing for Esau in the narrative cannot be simply disregarded in understanding Esau's narrative role. Why should the oracle and Isaac's blessings not be interpreted in relation to Esau and Jacob at an individual level? The Esau-Jacob story may be not simply a story of the two brothers, but we need not read the particulars of their story as an allegory for the histories of Edom and Israel. In view of this, another important question in understanding Esau's role and traditional understanding of Esau is when and how the divine oracle (Gen. 25:23) and Isaac's blessings for Esau and Jacob (Gen. 27:27-29, 39-40) will be fulfilled in the narrative.

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[73]Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 117.

[74]Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 118.

The Oracle and Isaac's Blessings: Fulfilled or Null and Void?

One group of scholars such as Claus Westermann and John R. Bartlett[75] does not think that the divine oracle or Isaac's blessings are fulfilled within Genesis 25-36 because they have understood that those key passages are later additions which refer exclusively to the histories of Israel and Edom apart from the plot development of the Esau-Jacob story. They have not undertaken to study in detail how these key passages relate to the narrative roles of Jacob and Esau *as individuals* within the narrative. Esau's narrative portrait in relation to the oracle and Isaac's blessing within the Esau-Jacob story is completely out of their interests.

On the contrary, another group of scholars such as Jan P. Fokkelman, Walter Brueggemann, Peter D. Miscall, and John Goldingay[76] assumes without question that the divine oracle or Isaac's blessings are fulfilled in the Esau-Jacob story. For example, Miscall asserts that the question of the fulfilment of Isaac's blessings for Jacob (Gen. 27:28-29; Gen. 28:3-4) is already answered and only the issue of how it is to be fulfilled remains in the Jacob story. Miscall assumes that the rest of the Jacob story details its process.[77] Goldingay asserts that the reader will read the Jacob-Esau story in the context of Gen. 25:23 and marvel at how the divine oracle is fulfilled in extraordinary ways.[78]

These scholars have not emphasised that the Esau-Jacob story in fact does not develop the predicted elements of the divine oracle and Isaac's

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[75]See Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 443; Bartlett, "The Brotherhood of Edom," 16–20.

[76]See Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 94; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 208; Miscall, "The Jacob and Joseph Stories," 33; John Goldingay, "The Patriarchs in Scripture and History," in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (ed. A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1980), 18.

[77]Miscall, "The Jacob and Joseph Stories," 33.

[78]Goldingay, "The Patriarchs in Scripture and History," 18.

blessings explicitly. If one interprets the divine oracle (Gen. 25:23) and Isaac's blessings (Gen. 27:27-29, 39-40) literally, these passages *can* be regarded as indicating Jacob the younger's lordship over Esau the older. Ironically, the narrative role of Jacob in the Esau-Jacob story does not reveal him exercising any lordship at all. Rather, Jacob is portrayed as the servant of Laban and Esau. Jacob serves[79] Laban his uncle for his wives Leah and Rachel. Isaac's blessing for Esau (Gen. 27:40) predicts that Esau will serve his brother Jacob, but in Genesis 32-33 Jacob ironically plays a role of the servant in front of Esau by calling Esau "my lord" (Gen. 32:4, 5, 18; Gen. 33:8, 13, 14) and bowing down seven times before Esau (Gen. 33:3). Esau does not serve Jacob in the narrative. Esau has prospered as much as Jacob. Esau becomes the leader of four hundred men (Gen. 32:6; 33:1) and has abundant possessions to the extent that he cannot live together with Jacob because of his possessions.[80] In what sense are the divine oracle and Isaac's blessing fulfilled? Do they not become null and void in the narrative?[81] The narrative portraits of Esau and Jacob in relation to the oracle and Isaac's blessings are ironic and they need further explanation.

As shown by the scholarly discussion on the divine oracle and blessing in relation to Esau's narrative role, historical critics have interpreted the elements that enable one to construct the portrait of Esau, such as the divine oracle and blessing, etiologically. Etiological interpretations of the Esau-Jacob story contain negative ideologies on Esau and Edom as being inferior to Jacob

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[79]In the Esau-Jacob narrative, the term עָבַד is used to describe Jacob serving Laban (Gen. 29:15, 18, 20, 25, 27, 30; Gen. 30:26, 29; Gen. 31:6, 41). See Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 121.

[80]The perception of space here is, however, questionable. This will be further discussed in chapter 6.

[81]Turner states that the divine oracle and Isaac's blessings, in terms of one's service to the other, founder within the Jacob-Esau story. See Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 124.

and Israel. They have not considered and explained how the divine oracle and blessing can be related to the lives of Esau and Jacob at an individual level carefully. However, the other group of scholars who do not take historical approaches also have not discussed why the divine oracle and Isaac's blessings for Esau and Jacob are not fulfilled in depth.

Thus far, I have discussed the current scholarship on the characterisation in Genesis and traditional scholarly treatment of the Esau-Jacob narrative. As we have seen, Esau as a character has not drawn much attention from scholars, and they are more interested in etiological aspects of the Esau-Jacob narrative.

3. Esau's Interpreters in Biblical and Extra-Biblical Texts

Previously, I have reviewed the major works of contemporary Genesis commentators and scholars who have read the Esau texts in the book of Genesis negatively, unfavourably or etiologically. These readings, as we have seen, are not simply inevitable deductions from the biblical text itself. Why then are they so prevalent in the scholarly literature? In this section, I move to review the negative readings of Esau that are embedded in other biblical and extra-biblical texts, in order to suggest that they have coloured the reading of the Genesis text by both ancient and modern commentators.

Preliminary Word Study on Esau

In order to discuss the overall picture of Esau in the Bible outside Genesis and the various roles and characteristics attributed to him, a preliminary word study on "Esau" and its relation to potential synonyms such as "Edom" is necessary. "Esau", even as a lexical entity, has a range of nuances throughout these biblical texts.

First of all, *Esau* is mostly used as a name to refer to Esau, a narrative character without any implication (Gen. 25:25, 27, 28, 29; Deut. 2:5; Heb. 11:20), and Esau is often mentioned with his status in his family. The narrator tells Esau's status in his family directly or indirectly through the voice of characters in various ways: his [Isaac's] *older son* (Gen. 27:1), Esau your [Isaac's] *firstborn* (Gen. 27:19; 32), my [Isaac's] son Esau (Gen. 27:24), her [Rebekah's] older son Esau, and *son of Isaac* (Gen. 35:29). Among various roles attributed to Esau within his family, the role of *Jacob's brother* is dominant (Gen. 27:42; 32:6, 11, 17; 35:11). Esau's role as Jacob's brother can be seen not only by the Genesis narrator but also by other characters. For example, Jacob refers to Esau as "my brother" (Gen. 27:11; 32:17). In relation to Jacob, Esau is mostly referred to as Jacob's brother (Gen. 27:42; 32:6, 11, 17; 35:11; Mal. 1:2). When other characters such as Isaac, Rebekah, and Jacob's servants refer to Esau in relation to Jacob, Esau is "your brother" (Gen:27:6, 35; 27:42; 32:6). Therefore, Jacob himself and other characters (including the narrator) acknowledge that Esau is Jacob's brother. From the perspective of Jacob, Esau is also referred to "my lord Esau." (Gen. 32:4, 18). Furthermore, Esau becomes a *father* of Jeush, Jalam, and Korah (Gen. 36:5, 14).[82]

Secondly, Esau is portrayed as an ancestor (or the father) of Edom. The book of Genesis contains the genealogy of Esau's descendants, the Edomites (Genesis 36). Gen. 36:9 reads: "These are the generations of *the father of Edom (or the Edomites)* in the hill country of Seir." Deuteronomy repeats "the descendants of Esau" (Deut. 2:4, 8, 12, 22, 29). Esau is often referred to as Edom (Gen. 36:1, 8, 9, 19, 43; Obad. 1:6) and Esau often represents Edom as a

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[82]Cf. The Chronicler shows Esau's genealogy in two different ways: (1) the sons of Isaac: Esau and Israel (1 Chr. 1:34), and (2) the sons of Esau: Eliphaz, Reuel, Jeush, Jalam, and Korah (1 Chr. 1:35).

nation, people, or territory. Obadiah mentions "the house of Esau" (Obad. 1:18). The "mountain of Esau" is another favourite expression in Obadiah as a counterpart of Mount Zion (especially in Obad. 1:21) or the territory of Esau (Obad. 1:8, 9, 19, 21). The terms *Esau* and *Edom* are used interchangeably in the Hebrew Bible. As Esau is called Edom, Edom becomes another name for Esau especially in the book of Genesis (Gen. 25:30; Gen. 36:1, 8, 19, 43). The narrator also mentions Edom as a territory in Genesis (Gen. 36:16, 17, 21, 43). Edom is related to the land of Seir, but it is not clear whether Seir and Edom are the same land in the narrative.[83]

Thirdly, in prophetic literature and the New Testament writings, Esau is often portrayed as a negative type. In the prophetic literature, the name *Esau* appears mostly in the book of Obadiah (Obad. 1:6, 8, 9, 19, 21). Prophetic literature portrays Esau as a person who is hated by God (Mal. 1:3), shameful (Jer. 49:10), and should be removed (Jer. 49:8). Malachi acknowledges that Esau is Jacob's brother but he is not a person that God loves. From the Malachi writer's perspective, God loves Jacob (Mal. 1:2). In line with Esau, Edom's role in the prophetic literature is mostly the object of God's anger, punishment, or judgment. Edom is a nation of sins (Amos 1:11) and a nation that should be destroyed by God (Mal. 1:4).

The New Testament writers also disdain Esau. Romans 9:11-13[84] directly quotes the divine oracle given to Rebekah (Gen. 25:23) and Mal. 1:2-3: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." Paul uses Gen. 25:23 and Mal. 1:2-3 literally without trying to interpret these verses within their context. The writer

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[83]The relationship between Esau and Edom (Seir and Edom) will be discussed in chapter 6.

[84]Rom. 9:10-13 reads: "And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (NASB)

of Hebrews states that by faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau (Heb. 11:20). However, the writer of Hebrews describes Esau as a man who is sexually immoral and godless (Heb. 12:16).

This brief word study on Esau clearly indicates that there are strikingly different perspectives toward Esau and Edom within the Bible. Whether or not Esau is portrayed negatively in the book of Genesis, other books in the Bible, especially prophetic literature, Romans and Hebrews, describe Esau very negatively either by connecting him with Edom as a nation or by giving him as an example of a forsaken, immoral or godless person. In the following section, the details of this negative portrayal will be discussed more fully.

Esau in Prophetic Literature

> *For I will bring the calamity of Esau upon him, the time when I punish him. . . . But I have stripped up Esau bare, I have uncovered his hiding places, and he is not able to conceal himself. His children are destroyed, and his brothers, and his neighbors; and he is no more (Jer. 49:8, 10 RSV)*
>
> *How Esau has been pillaged, his treasures sought out! (Obad. 1:6 RSV)*
>
> *I have loved you, says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us? Is not Esau Jacob's brother? says the LORD. Yet I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau; I have made his hill country a desolation and his heritage a desert for jackals. If Edom says, "We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins," the LORD of hosts says: They may build but I will tear down, until they are called the wicked country, the people with whom the LORD is angry forever (Mal. 1:2-4 NRSV)*

While *Edom*'s role in the prophetic literature has drawn scholarly attention, *Esau*'s role has not drawn much attention from scholars. To discuss the portrayal of Esau in the prophetic literature, it is appropriate to review scholarship on Edom's role in the prophetic literature first. Edom's position in the prophetic literature is extraordinary. Bert Dicou, in his book *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist: The Role of Edom in Biblical Prophecy and Story*,[85] has investigated the origin and development of Edom's role in the Old Testament as Israel's antagonist.[86] Dicou argues that Edom is a symbolic name for Israel's enemies in the prophetic literature. According to him, Edom is "the representative of the nations and Israel's antagonist."[87] Dicou is not the only scholar who has insisted on Edom's position in the prophetic literature, and he cites several others in his book. As M. Haller observes, more than other nations Edom has been regarded as the object of hate.[88] A. Mailland points out that Edom is the type of the adversary nation.[89] B. C. Cresson also argues the

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[85]Bert Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist: The Role of Edom in Biblical Prophecy and Story* (JSOTSup. 169; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994).

[86]In 1990, Dicou, in his doctoral dissertation at the university of Amsterdam, studied the role of Edom in the Old Testament with two groups of texts, which are on the one hand, the Jacob and Esau stories in Genesis, and on the other hand, certain oracles in the prophetic literature. Dicou's dissertation was primarily a synchronic literary analysis and attempted to demonstrate that these two groups of texts are closely related regardless of their different perspective on Edom. Dicou argues that in both group of the texts Edom plays a symbolic role as *representative of all the nations of the earth* and serves as *Israel's opponent*. See Dicou's own summary; Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist*, 16.

Dicou, in his book *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist: The Role of Edom in Biblical Prophecy and Story*, expands his interest into diachronic questions such as historical circumstances by which Edom came to play a role as an Israel's opponent. He also examines which period of Israel's history the two groups of texts did emerge and relate to each other.

[87]Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist*, 16.

[88]M. Haller, "Edom Im Urtel der Propheten," in *Vom Alten Testament* (ed. K. Budde; Fs K. Marti, BZAW 41; Giessen, 1925), 109–17. Quoted from Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist*, 13.

[89]See A. Mailland, 'La "petite apocalypse" d'Isaïe. Etude sur les chapitres XXXIV et XXXV du livre d'Isaïe' (Ph.D. diss.; Lyons, 1956), 75–90. Quoted from Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist*, 13.

existence of a "Damn-Edom Theology" in the oracles against Edom.[90] As studied by these scholars, Edom has been regarded as a negative type symbolising the object of hate, adversary nation, or Israel's opponent in the prophetic literature.[91] Esau, as a father of Edom, represents Edom, and for this reason Esau has been also regarded as a negative type by most scholars.

As reviewed briefly in the preliminary word study on Esau, however, there are not many prophetic texts which directly mention the name *Esau*: Jeremiah (Jer. 49:8, 10), Obadiah (Obad. 6, 8, 9, 18, 19, 21), and Malachi (Mal. 1:2, 3). Isaiah 34 and Ezekiel 35 contain long oracles against Edom, but these oracles do not contain the name Esau.

Although Esau appears in Jeremiah, Obadiah, and Malachi, none of these books alludes to any narrative details about the Esau story in Genesis. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Obadiah show acquaintance with the identification of Edom and Esau or the connection of Edom and Seir, but these books also do not show any evidence of acquaintance with the story of Esau in Genesis.[92]

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[90]For further discussion, see B. C. Cresson, "Israel and Edom: A Study of Anti-Edom in Old Testament Religion" (Ph.D. diss.; Duke University, 1956), 49–99. Quoted from Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist*, 13–4.

[91]In regard to why Edom gets this status, Bert Dicou comments, "Various events from the common history of Israel and Edom are considered to have contributed to Edom's exceptional role in the prophetic books. There is, however, no unanimous agreement on which of these events was decisive. The oracles against Edom themselves seem to indicate that Edom sided with the Babylonians when the latter came to destroy Judah and Jerusalem (589-587 BCE). In the book of Obadiah the Edomites are held responsible for Israel's ruin (vv. 8-15) and Ezekiel 35 can be interpreted in the same way (see vv. 5-6)." See Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist*, 182; Cf. B. C. Cresson, "The Condemnation of Edom in Postexilic Judaism," in *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays: Studies in Honor of William Franklin Stinespring* (ed. J. M. Efird; Durham, 1972), 142–3. Contrary to the above scholarly position, Elie Assis states, "It was not Edom's participation in the destruction or even in the colonization of Judah that led to the exceptional attitude toward Edom in the Biblical sources. The ideological and theological significance that Judah assigned to Edom's acts is what led the prophets to focus on Edom." See Elie Assis, "Why Edom? On the Hostility towards Jacob's Brother in Prophetic Sources," *VT* 56 (2006): 20.

[92]Elie Assis suggests an opposite hypothesis to my argument. Assis believes that people dwelling in Judah after the destruction of the First Temple were aware of the story of Esau and Jacob in the book of Genesis (or in similar oral traditions). Assis claims that Israel's perception of the meaning of the struggle between their fathers Esau and Jacob has affected the

Therefore, Esau here does not appear as an individual character but represents *corporate Edom* just as Jacob as a name often represents corporate Israel (Hos. 10:11; Amos 6:8) in the prophetic literature. Nevertheless, Esau is still considered a negative type, because he after all represents Edom in the Hebrew Bible. For those who regard Edom as a negative type, it is rarely possible that they would view or evaluate Esau as a favourable character.

Esau in Rabbinic and Extra-Biblical Literature

The portrayal of Esau in rabbinic literature is extremely negative and polemic. Esau becomes a character who receives intentional disparagement by Jewish writers. In the book of Genesis, the details that the narrator provides about Esau do not oblige readers to see Esau's morals in a negative light, but rabbinic literature denounces Esau's morals severely. From a rabbinic point of view, Esau is an evil and vicious character throughout his life. In addition, rabbinic literature shows more diverse portrayals of Esau than the biblical texts.

First of all, Esau is described as born to be evil. Esau shows his evil character even from Rebekah's womb. Genesis Rabbah 63:6 records that Esau maltreats his twin brother Jacob in Rebekah's womb.[93] According to Midrash

hostility to Edom shown in prophetic literature (For further discussion, see Assis, "Why Edom?"). However, Assis' hypothesis cannot be strongly supported by the textual evidence. It is not clear in the text whether prophets were well aware of the Esau story in Genesis except the identification of Esau with Edom. While Assis assumes that prophets are affected by the portrayal (seemingly, *negative* portrayal) of Esau in Genesis, my position is that our reading of Esau is more than likely to be influenced by the prophets' negative reaction to Edom. See also Elie Assis, "From Adam to Esau and Israel: An Anti-Edomite Ideology in 1 Chronicles 1," *VT* 56 (2006): 287–302.

[93]R. Berekhiah in the name of R. Levi said, "It is so that you should not say that it was only after he left his mother's womb that [Esau] contends against Jacob. But even while he was yet in his mother's womb, his fist was stretched forth against him: 'The wicked stretch out their fists [so Freedman] from the womb' (Ps. 58:4)." Quotations and translations are from Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis: A New American Translation* (Vol 2; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 353.

While the book of Genesis describes that Jacob and Esau look very different from their

Hagadol to Genesis 25:22, Esau threatens Jacob by vowing to kill Rebekah if Jacob does not let him go out first.[94] His evil temperament continues throughout his life. He is described as a womaniser or an immoral person who often insults women and even commits murder (cf. Genesis Rabbah 65:1;[95] Pesiqta Rabbati 12; Jubilee 25:1, 8). On the day Esau sold his birthright, he is also portrayed as violating a betrothed woman and committing several murders (cf. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Gen. 27:15; Baba Batra 16). According to Pesiqta Rabbati 12, Esau's evil character caused the death of his grandfather Abraham.[96]

Secondly, Esau is portrayed as an atheist in rabbinic literature. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 25:29 reads that Esau's selling his birthright occurs while Jacob is preparing for Isaac the lentil stew which is an usual meal for mourners (cf. Pirqe deRabbi Eliezer 35). Esau sells his birthright to eat this lentil stew for Isaac, speaking about God in an offensive way (Genesis Rabbah 63:13)[97] and denying the resurrection of the dead (cf. Pesiqta Rabbati 12:48).

Thirdly, Esau is described as a liar or hypocrite. While Jacob is described as more crafty than Esau in the book of Genesis, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 25:28 claims that Esau pretends to be a good son and gains Isaac's affection by lying words. Esau's kiss and tears in his reunion

birth, Tanḥuma Toledot 2 reads that Esau and Jacob look very much alike in their boyhood so that they could not be easily distinguished until they reached thirteen years of age.

[94]Quoted from Harry Freedman, "Jacob and Esau: Their Struggle in the Second Century," *JBQ* 23 (1995): 108.

[95]Genesis Rabbah 65:1 reads, "So Esau, for all forty years, hunted married women, ravished them, and when he reached the age of forty, he presented himself to his father, saying, 'Just as father got married at the age of forty, so I shall marry a wife at the age of forty.'" Quoted from Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 379.

[96]Emil G. Hirsch, "Esau," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia: A Guide to Its Contents and an Aid to Its Use* (ed. Joseph Jacobs; London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1906), 206–8.

[97]Genesis Rabbah 63:13 records that R. Simeon b. Laqish said, "He began to revile and blaspheme. What do I need it for: '. . . of what use is a birthright to me?'" See Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 364.

with Jacob (Gen. 33:4) has been also regarded as a hypocritical act in many rabbinic writings (cf. Sifre Numbers 9:10; Genesis Rabbah 78:9; Aboth deRabbi Nathan 34; Exodus Rabbah 5:10).[98] According to Genesis Rabbah 78:9,[99] Esau wept because he bit Jacob's neck under the guise of kissing him but the neck turned into stone and hurt Esau's teeth.

Fourthly, Esau, along with his wives, is depicted as an idol worshipper. Genesis Rabbah 63:10 records that after 13 years of schooling Esau ended up visiting the shrines of idols.[100] When Esau was in Rebekah's womb and she once passed a temple of idolatrous worship, Esau is portrayed as wishing to go to the temple and so striving to be born at the time (Genesis Rabbah 63:6).[101] Tanḥuma Toledot 6 also states that it is the idol worship of Esau's wives which made Isaac sad and caused Isaac's blindness, but other rabbinic traditions such as Genesis Rabbah 65:10 argue that Isaac loses his sight from his effort not to see Esau's evil deeds.[102] (cf. Pesiqta Rabbati 12, Megillah 28a)

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[98]Exodus Rabbah 5:10 reads: "'The first was of common earthenware and only covered with gold, but this one is all of gold.' Similarly, the kiss with which Esau kissed Jacob was only dross, as it is said: *Burning lips and a wicked heart are like an earthen vessel overlaid with silver dross* (Prov. xxvi, 23). For what did he (Esau) prove to be in the end? To possess '*burning lips and a wicked heart*', for he did not wish to kiss him but to bite him." Quoted from S. M. Lehrman, *Exodus: Translated into English with Notes, Glossary, and Indices* (ed. H. Freedman; Midrash Rabbah III; London: Soncino Press, 1983), 90.

[99]"But our father Jacob's neck became stone, and hurt the teeth of that wicked man [Esau]." Quoted from Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah the Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis: A New American Translation* (Vol 3; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 129.

[100]Genesis Rabbah 63:10 reads "So for thirteen years both went to school and came home from school. After this age, one went to the house of study and the other to idolatrous shrines." Quoted from H. Freedman, *Genesis II: Translated Into English with Notes, Glossary, and Indices* (ed. H. Freedman; Midrash Rabbah II; London: Soncino Press, 1983), 565.

[101]"When she went by houses of idolatry, Esau would kick, trying to get out: 'The wicked are estranged from the womb.'" (Ps. 58:4) Quoted from Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 353.

[102]According to Gen. Rab. 65:10, Rabbi Eleazar b. Azariah said, ". . . so that he could not see the wickedness of the wicked person." See Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 385.

Fifthly, Esau is seen as a trouble maker in rabbinic literature. According to the book of Genesis, Esau left Canaan because of his abundant possessions to stay in that land together with Jacob, and consequently settled in the hill country of Seir (Gen. 36:6-8). However, Sefer ha-Yashar 6 states that Esau and his children had quarrels with the inhabitants of Canaan and these are what caused Esau to move to Seir.

Esau's portrayal in other extra-biblical literature is pretty similar. In the pseudepigraphic work, the book of Jubilees,[103] a story of a war between Esau and Jacob is preserved. According to Jubilees 37 and 38, Esau's sons coerce Esau into waging war with Jacob. Esau at first does not want to make war and recalls the oath he has sworn to Isaac to live in peace, but his sons threaten him to make him fall in with their request (Jub. 37:3-5; 7-11). Although Esau is portrayed for a moment as having a favourable attitude toward Jacob, the threat from his sons changes Esau's character, and overall Esau in the scene of war with Jacob is portrayed as wicked. The author of Jubilees vilifies Esau by giving him the following speech to Jacob:

> Neither the children of men nor the beasts of the earth have any oath of righteousness which in swearing they have sworn (an oath valid) for ever; but every day they devise evil one against another, and how each may slay his adversary and foe. And thou dost hate me and my children forever. And there is no observing the tie of brotherhood with thee.[104]

Esau's speech to Jacob shows how completely Esau's temporarily favourable attitude toward Jacob has turned into hostility. Ultimately, Jacob shoots an arrow into Esau's right breast and slays him (Jub. 38:2). After Esau is dead, Jacob's sons pursue Esau's sons to the mountains of Seir (Jub. 38:9), and they

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[103]The book of Jubilees dates probably in the latter years of the 2nd century B.C.E.

[104]Jub. 37:18-19. Translations are from Robert Henry Charles, *The Book of Jubilees or the Little Genesis* (Berwick: Ibis Press, 2005), 181.

come to pay the tribute to Jacob until the day that he went down into Egypt (Jub. 38:12-13).[105]

This brief review of various portrayals of Esau in rabbinic literature and other extra-biblical texts shows that Jewish writers have been eager to attack Esau's morals. From their point of view, Esau is a character whom they love to hate. They leave us with the disturbing impression that Esau was intrinsically and irredeemably wicked.

There are certain common characteristics of such negative reading of Esau. First, they tend to fill in the gaps by twisting or changing details found in the book of Genesis. In their desire to blacken Esau's name, they treat him unfairly, often going beyond any reasonable inference that ordinary readers could derive from the biblical text. Rabbinic interpretations, in their nature, expand the original version of the Esau story in Genesis. The most significant difference is in their portrayal of God's attitude toward Esau. In the book of Genesis, the narrator does not explicitly mention that God is against Esau. However, rabbinic and other extra-biblical literature portrays God as working actively against Esau. For example, when Esau is hunting game to earn Isaac's blessing, an angel prevents Esau from succeeding in the hunt. Whenever Esau captures an animal to give to Isaac, Genesis Rabbah 67:2 records that an angel intervenes and surreptitiously unbinds it in order to ensure Jacob receives the blessing.[106] Similarly, when Jacob returns home from Paddan-aram and Esau intends to kill Jacob on his way home, Sefer ha-Yashar 6 records that God

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[105]Similarly, Testament of Judah 9:1-8 also records that Jacob's sons pursued Esau's sons to Mount Seir and they became a tributary of Judah.

[106]According to Genesis Rabbah 67:2, "R. Joshua b. of Levi said: Esau spent the whole of that day in catching deer and trussing them, but an angel came and freed them; and birds, which he tied together, but an an angel came and liberated them. And why was this? Because, as it is written, But the substance of the man of glory is determined (ib.), i.e. so that Jacob who was the glory of the world might come and receive the blessings which had been determined as his from the very beginning of the world." Quoted from H. Freedman, *Genesis II*, 607.

sends four angels to prevent Esau from killing Jacob. Therefore, God, in this literature, is working against Esau while God in the book of Genesis is not explicitly hostile to Esau.

Secondly, as the Esau story is expanded freely in rabbinic and extra-biblical literature, their descriptions of the Esau story often conflict with each other on many occasions. For example, as mentioned, while Tanḥuma Toledot attributes Isaac's blindness to idol worshipping by Esau's wives, Genesis Rabbah 65:10 takes Esau's evil deeds as the cause for Isaac's losing his sight (because of Isaac's effort not to see Esau's evil deeds).

While it is clear that there is polemic against Esau in rabbinic and extra-biblical literature, the reason for this polemic is not always clearly embedded within this literature. However, the possible reason for the enmity between Israel and the descendants of Esau in their history is recognisable within the biblical texts. Biblical references allude to several possible incidents that may have brought out mutual hatred between Israel and Edom. From the book of Numbers, the conflict between Israel and Edom as nations begins. When wandering Israelites wanted to pass through Edom's territory near Kadesh, Edom refused their request (Num. 20:17-18). Since Edom has refused to let them go through their territory, Israel turned away from them (Num. 20:20-21). After this incident at Kadesh, wars between the two sides also seem to worsen mutual hatred (2 Sam. 8:13-14; 1 Kgs 11:15-16; 2 Kgs 14:7; Amos 1:11-12). In books such as Deuteronomy, Judges, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles,[107] the relationship between Israel and Edom is very hostile. For example, in the book of Judges, the narrator repeats the Kadesh incident from Deuteronomy (cf. Judg. 11:16-17). In the book of Samuel, the narrator says

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[107]In these historical books, Edom, as a nation, controls their own territory (Josh. 14:1, 21; Jud. 5:4; 11:18; 1 Kgs. 9:26, etc) and plays a role as Israel's enemy (1 Sam. 14:47; 2 Kgs. 8:22; 14:10; 2 Chr. 21:8, 10).

that Saul attacked Edom (1 Sam. 14:47) and David finally subdued Edom (2 Sam. 8:14). Balaam's oracle (Num. 24:18)[108] against Edom therefore may be regarded as being fulfilled in the period of David's reign. Edom was under the control of David (2 Sam. 8:14; 1 Chr. 18:13). Joab also struck down all the men in Edom when David was fighting with Edom (1Kgs 11:15-16). 1 Kgs. 22:47 (MT 22:48) records that there was no king in Edom at the time, but in the time of Jehoram Edom rebelled against Judah and set up its own king (2 Kgs. 8:20). The scornful involvement of the Edomites when Jerusalem was destroyed seems to lead to even more severe hatred against Edom.[109] This is well reflected in some of the most bitter prayers of the Hebrew Bible (Obadiah; Lam 4:21-22; Ps. 137:7-9).[110]

The hatred against Esau's descendants is not derived from the portrayal of Esau in the book of Genesis. According to my reading of Esau, polemic or hatred against Esau or Esau's descendants is not strongly recognisable in Genesis. It is more than likely caused during the course of mutual political conflict between Israel and Edom (if these events are historical).[111] The rabbinic equation of Esau and Edom with Rome may also contribute to the rise

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[108]Num. 24:18 reads: "And Edom shall be a possession, Seir, its enemies, also shall be a possession, while Israel performs valiantly." (NASB)

[109]It may be possible that the later hatred against Edom over the fall of Jerusalem has shaped the account of earlier incidents such as the Kadesh tradition.

[110]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 342. Isaiah 63 also reflects hatred against Edom. Similarly with Wenham, Frank Crüsemann comments, "The scornful participation of the Edomites in the destruction of Jerusalem and in the exile of God's people led to a hatred of Edom, which lasted for centuries and gave rise to some of the most brutal texts of the Hebrew Bible (Psalm 137; Isaiah 63). Eventually Edom became the symbolic name of all inimical and destructive worldly powers." See Crüsemann, "Dominion, Guilt, and Reconciliation," 67.

[111]One could argue that later conflicts between Israel and Edom (if they are historical) led to the development of earlier etiological aspects of the Esau-Jacob narrative. Although national or political elements exist in the Esau-Jacob narrative, the Esau-Jacob story can be read naturally without considering these elements. The story is primarily about the two brothers Esau and Jacob, not Edom and Israel. This kind of argument is based on the assumption that the Esau-Jacob narrative was wholly written to explain later political conflicts between Edom and Israel, but its supporting evidence is flimsy.

of hate against Esau's descendants. There could be several explanations for the existence of this polemic and which is correct is a fundamentally complex question and hard to prove. However, my contention is that it is not likely that hatred against Esau's descendants developed from reading of the Esau-Jacob story in Genesis. On the contrary, the Genesis text seems to be reread in the light of later conflicts between Edom and Israel.

Esau from Paul's Point of View

> *"And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (Rom 9:10-14 NASB)*

In the New Testament, Esau as a character appears twice — in Romans 9 and Hebrews 12. While Edom as a nation frequently appears in the Hebrew Bible, the name is never mentioned in the New Testament. Paul provides an unfavourable reading of Esau in Romans 9. Explaining God's election and rejection, Paul takes two quotations from the Greek text of the Old Testament, Gen. 25:23 and Mal. 1:2-3.[112] Paul's quotation of Mal. 1:2-3, followed by his quotation of Gen. 25:23, comes with one of Paul's favourite formulas καθὼς γέγραπται , *just as it is written.* By using this formula, Paul gives an impression that Jacob's preeminence over Esau was *caused by* God's love for

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[112]Taking quotations, one from Torah and the other from the Prophets together is common to appeal to Scriptural authority. Cf. Matthew Black, *Romans: Based on the Revised Standard Version* (2nd ed.; New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 129.

Jacob and hate for Esau.[113] Although Paul uses the "just as it is written" formula, Paul in fact does not exactly copy the passage from the Septuagint. He makes Τὸν Ἰακὼβ precede the verb, "Jacob I loved." This could be either simply stylistic[114] or showing Paul's emphasis on Jacob as the object of God's election.[115]

What did Paul intend by quoting Ὁ μείζων δουλεύσει τῷ ἐλάσσονι (*The greater will serve the lesser*) and Τὸν Ἰακὼβ ἠγάπησα, τὸν δὲ Ἡσαῦ ἐμίσησα (*I have loved Jacob, but hated Esau*)? To understand Paul's attitude toward Esau as an individual, we need to figure out the nuance of "love" and "hate" and the referents of the names Esau and Jacob.

First, it is hard to know whether Paul quoted Mal. 1:2-3 to use "love" and "hate" literally or metaphorically. "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" could mean "I preferred Jacob to Esau", "Jacob I have chosen, but Esau I have not chosen (or have rejected)", or "Jacob I loved, but Esau I loved less."[116] If Paul had used the words "love" and "hate" metaphorically, Paul's statement could be less critical about Esau than using it literally. However, even if Paul used these words this way, it is evident that Paul's attitude toward Esau is not favourable to Esau.

Secondly, there is also the question of whom Paul is referring to as Esau and Jacob. Like the many Genesis scholars who read the story of Jacob and Esau as an etiological story of Israel and Edom, scholars such as F. F. Bruce and Leon Morris understand Jacob and Esau in this passage as

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[113]Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 584.

[114]Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 584.

[115]Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 6; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 500.

[116]For scholars who take this view, see C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (2nd ed.; Black's New Testament Commentaries; London: A & C Black, 1991), 170; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 187; Black, *Romans*, 129.

representing the two nations Israel and Edom or the two peoples the Israelites and the Edomites, not Jacob and Esau as individuals.[117] As Esau and Jacob often refer to the nations or peoples descended from each of them, there is a possibility that Paul might have used the names of Esau and Jacob this way. Furthermore, in the contexts from which Paul takes his quotations, the names stand for the nations of Edom and Israel rather than Esau and Jacob as individuals.

Another group of scholars such as Thomas R. Schreiner, Douglas J. Moo, and Robert H. Mounce, however, do relate Esau and Jacob in Rom. 9:12-14 to the characters of the Genesis story.[118] For example, Moo suggests that the vocabulary Paul used in connection with Jacob and Esau in Rom. 9:10-11, such as conception, birth, election, call, and works, is not easily applied to nations.[119]

Whichever is the case, it is evident that Paul's reading of Esau is not favourable to Esau. Esau serves as an example of his overlapping theological arguments in Romans 9: (1) Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel (Rom. 9:6); (2) Not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants (Rom. 9:7); (3) It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of promise are reckoned as the descendants (Rom. 9:8); and (4) God's election is not caused by our works but by his call (Rom. 9:11-12). From Paul's point of view, both Esau and Jacob are sons of Isaac (thus grandsons of Abraham), but Esau is not among the elect. Both Esau and Jacob had the same father and mother. Before Esau is born, he has not done

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[117]See F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1985), 182; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 356.

[118]See Schreiner, *Romans*, 502; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 585–86; Robert H. Mounce, *Romans* (Nashiville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 198.

[119]Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 585.

anything, good or bad. However, Esau could not become God's elect by his call. According to Paul, election depends on God's choice and the rejection of Esau is the example of God's free choice.[120]

Paul's negative reading of Esau is visible in his use of the biblical references. Paul's quotations are not followed by any rationale for selecting these specific verses which contain a bias against Esau. Paul simply quotes Gen. 25:23 and Mal. 1:2-3 to support his theological arguments on election. Paul, however, embarks on a creative interpretation. He makes a claim that stretches beyond the meaning and significance of the quoted verses in their original context. His interpretation arises out of his need to support his argument. Lining up simply a series of biblical verses for a theological argument is not always a good way of convincing readers. A good theological argument needs a reasoned way of understanding certain biblical data, since the biblical texts need to be interpreted. Paul does not present a reasoned way of his own understanding of Gen. 25:23 and Mal. 1:2-3. We as readers cannot know clearly in what sense Paul has understood these verses in their original context.

Besides Paul's quotation of Gen. 25:23 and Mal. 1:2-3 out of their original context, Paul's use of the Greek text of the Old Testament (Septuagint, LXX) brings out a discontinuity with the portrayal of Esau in the book of Genesis. New Testament authors, including Paul, looking back their understanding of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection, often quote passages

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[120]Similarly, Gordon J. Wenham comments, "For Paul, the election of Jacob and the rejection of Esau is a great example of God's free and unfettered choice (Rom. 9:10-12). Yet he too looks for a day of ultimate reconciliation, when those who have long rejected the gospel will find mercy (Rom 11:25-32), a day when, as Rev. 7:9 describes it, "a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues" will stand before the throne and the Lamb. And it is these two themes, the present rejection of Esau and his ultimate reincorporation into the people of God, that Gen 36 juxtaposes." See Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 342.

from the Old Testament using the Greek text of the Old Testament rather than the Hebrew text. While the Septuagint reading may reflect a variety of Hebrew texts, it does not always convey the nuance of the Hebrew reading once translated into Greek. Using the Septuagint reading sometimes creates the discontinuity between the usage of a verse in the Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament. E. Earle Ellis summarises the scholarly consensus about the Septuagint citations in the New Testament as follows:

> In their textual form the [New Testament] citations . . . frequently follow the Septuagint, both because this Greek version was used in Palestine and in the Diaspora and, at times, because *the Septuagint rendering fit the writer's viewpoint* [emphasis mine]. For the same reasons some citations, on occasion against the Septuagint, agree with the Hebrew text (Matt. 2:15) or with the targum (cf. Eph. 4:8). *Ad hoc* renderings usually serve an interpretive interest.[121]

As I personally emphasised "the Septuagint rendering fit the writer's viewpoint," I argue that Paul's use of Gen. 25:23 for his theological argument was possible because his argument can be more strengthened by the Septuagint reading. Gen. 25:23 that Paul quotes from the Septuagint does not reflect the ambiguity in the Hebrew text.[122] While the Hebrew text does not clearly indicate the subject and object of the verb *to serve* — as I will discuss further in chapter two —, the Greek text disregards this ambiguity and shows in the nominative and dative cases of the two names that Esau will serve Jacob. Once Gen. 25:23 is translated into Greek, the ambiguity in Hebrew reading disappears. As Gen. 25:23 in the Greek text unambiguously takes Esau as one who will serve, it is less favourable to Esau than the Hebrew reading. This reflects a bias in the Septuagint which might also be traced to the influence of negative image of Esau in the prophetic books. Thus, I argue that the

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[121]E. Earle Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991), 71.

[122]I mean the Masoretic Text that is presently published in the *Biblia Hebraica.*

Septuagint rendering of Gen. 25:23 affected Paul's creative, believer's exegesis of Esau. Paul's way of reading Esau is possible, but this unfavourable reading of Esau is not the only way of reading.

Esau from the Viewpoint of the Author of Hebrews

> *[See to it] that no one be immoral or irreligious like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. (Heb. 12:16-17 RSV)*

With regard to negative readings of Esau, the author of Hebrews goes further than Paul. The author tells the readers to avoid immorality and irreligiousness and gives Esau as an example of such behaviour. The words πόρνος and βέβηλος are used to describe Esau's character. The term πόρνος is generally translated as "fornicator" (ASV, KJV, NKJ), "immoral" (NAB, NASB, NJB, NLT, RSV, NRSV), or "sexually immoral" (NIV). The term βέβηλος can be translated as "irreligious" (RSV), "profane" (ASV, KJV, NAB, NKJ), "degrade religion" (JB), "wordly-minded" (NJB, NEB) or "godless" (NASB, NLT, NRSV). From the Greek syntax of Heb. 12:16, there is a possibility that only the word βέβηλος[123] is attributed to Esau as the NIV translation takes it, but in either case, Esau is obviously not described in a positive way. He becomes a negative example for moral teaching. However, the way in which the author of Hebrews reads Esau brings out a couple of questions.

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[123]Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 188; Hamilton comments, "In the LXX, βέβηλος is associated with cultic matters (e.g. Lev. 10:10; Ezek. 4:14; 21:15; 22:26; 44:23). But in the NT it is always an ethical/religious term, applied either to people (1 Tim. 1:9; Heb. 12:16) or to things (1 Tim. 4:7; 6:20; 2 Tim. 2:16)."

First of all, it is difficult to understand how the author of Hebrews has come to regard Esau as sexually immoral. Since Esau is never described in the book of Genesis as sexually immoral, it is hard to know whether the author has used the expression literally or metaphorically.[124] Unless the author of Hebrews interpreted Esau's marriage with the Hittite women (cf. Gen. 26:34-35) as sexually immoral behaviour, it is difficult to attribute this quality to Esau.[125] How the author had Esau in mind as a fornicator is not at all certain, but it is possible that the author was acquainted with traditions such as the book of Jubilees and rabbinic tradition which portray Esau as a vicious and wicked character who is also sexually immoral. According to Jub. 25:1, Rebekah calls Jacob and complains that all the deeds of Esau's Canaanite wives are "fornication and lust." In his conversation with Rebekah, Jacob says that Esau has spoken frequently of marrying a sister of his Canaanite wives (cf. Jub. 25:8). With regard to Esau's sexual behaviour, it is more than likely that the author of Hebrews is employing this tradition, not the Genesis account.

Secondly, it is hard to understand why the author of Hebrews did not criticise Jacob as irreligious on the same ground as Esau. The author of Hebrews regards Esau's selling the birthright as an act of irreligiousness and a cause to fail to inherit the blessing. The author also criticises Esau's misplaced sense of values in selling the birthright for a single meal. If the author of Hebrews were an objective judge, he might rather sympathise with Esau and criticise Jacob for his deeds but he does not criticise Jacob at all. Jacob shows as little respect for the birthright by treating it as something buyable with a

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[124]F. F. Bruce argues for the literal. See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 350. On the contrary, G. W. Bachanan argues for the metaphorical. See George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews: Translation, Comment and Conclusions* (AB 36; Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), 220.

[125]The association of idolatry with sexual immorality in the Old Testament (cf. Exod. 34;14-17; Deut. 31:16) could be another possibility. See Ronald Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 265–66.

single meal. Jacob's attitude toward the birthright certainly cannot be regarded as religious.[126] However, the author of Hebrews seems to believe that Esau behaved in an irreligious manner by selling the birthright but Jacob's deed of buying his brother's birthright is not irreligious. The author uses only Esau as a negative example of irreligiousness. Furthermore, the author of Hebrews seems to understand that Esau's selling the birthright caused the rejection and was the cause of failing to inherit the blessing, but there is no causal relationship between selling the birthright and losing the blessing as a first-born within the Esau-Jacob narrative.[127]

Besides, the language of the paraphrase used by the author of Hebrews is not exactly based on the Genesis account. The author of Hebrews exaggerated the story of Esau's selling the birthright in Genesis 25 (if he had known this story). His comment "Esau was rejected" expresses more forcefully than what the Genesis text actually describes. There is no Hebrew equivalent term to ἀπεδοκιμάσθη,[128] *he was rejected* in Genesis 25. By exaggerating the story of Esau's selling the birthright, the author of Hebrews clearly gives Esau as a bad example of moral failure.

4. Concluding Remarks

Thus far, I have introduced Esau's interpreters — contemporary Genesis scholars, biblical authors, and rabbis — who have interpreted or expanded the story of Esau in Genesis unfavourably or negatively. I have also criticised these negative interpretations and shown that they do not derive from a close reading of the story of Esau in Genesis. They disregard some of ambiguities

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[126]I will discuss this further in chapter two.

[127]This will be discussed further in chapter two.

[128]This verb is also rarely used in the Septuagint. It appears primarily in the book of Jeremiah. See Jer. 6:30; 7:29; 8:9; 14:19.

embedded in Esau's speeches, deeds, and the narrator's comments, and as a result have taken the path of interpreting Esau negatively. In these readings, the image of Esau is distorted from how the Genesis text has actually portrayed him. Scholars have shown unfairness to Esau the non-elect and evaluated Esau as a negative role model. For the present study of Esau, their negative evaluations gives due reason for a new evaluation of Esau's portrayal.

Chapter 2
Esau on the Stage (Gen. 25:19-34)

and I love the lentil stew
they stuff me with
at all times—
oh, the red,
the red, red
stew—[129]

in *Esau's Letter*

Translated from the Hebrew
by Gabriel Levin

One may think that the book of Genesis does not tell much about the story of Esau, but the Esau texts in Genesis show various aspects of his life such as his birth (Gen. 25:22-26), role as a hunter (Gen. 25:27), marriage (Gen. 26:34; 28:6-9; 36:2-3), loss of Isaac's first blessing (Gen. 27:1-40), and reunion with Jacob after long separation (Gen. 33:1-15). The reader's first encounter with Esau is in Genesis 25. In Gen. 25:19-34, the narrator mainly narrates Esau's birth, role, and his selling the birthright to Jacob. As with the story of Ishmael, the story of Esau is bound up with his younger brother from the beginning, in his case Jacob. Readers cannot avoid considering Esau's birth, occupation and selling his birthright in relation to Jacob. In fact, Esau's

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[129]This is a portion of the poem titled *Esau's Letter*. Quoted from David Curzon, ed., *Modern Poems on the Bible: An Anthology* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 147–8. Curzon, *Modern Poems on the Bible*, 147–8.

whole life in the narrative is unthinkable without considering his relationship with Jacob.[130]

The present chapter discusses the narrative portrait of Esau in Gen. 25:19-34, principally by examining the following elements: (1) the divine oracle given to Rebekah concerning Esau (Gen. 25:23),[131] (2) the portrayal of Esau as red, hairy, and a skillful hunter, and (3) Esau's selling the birthright. In relation to Jacob, these elements may be misunderstood as showing Jacob's superiority over Esau, Esau's incivility, or Esau's short-sightedness as a character. In this chapter, however, it will be argued that these elements in Gen. 25:19-34 contain a possibility of viewing Esau favourably and positively. I will show how Genesis commentators and scholars have greatly misunderstood Esau because they have read his story with a certain bias against him.

1. Enigma of the Divine Oracle: Who Will Serve Whom?

Unlike Isaac and Ishmael whose names are announced to their mothers before their birth (Gen. 16:11; Gen. 17:19), either by the angel or God, neither Esau's name nor Jacob's is announced to Rebekah beforehand. Esau, as a counterpart character of Jacob, however, is himself a heroic figure whose birth and future is announced by divine speech.[132] The divine oracle given to

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[130]Roger Syrén states that Esau's relationship with his twin brother Jacob is mainly one of competition and conflict. See Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born*, 66.

[131]Gen. 25:23 reads: And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples shall be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger." (NASB)

[132]This announcement can be viewed as a type-scene. Type-scenes are certain scenes in the Hebrew Bible that can be easily expected by readers because they are typically used on several occasions. For example, the birth of biblical heroes are announced in advance by divine speech (Gen. 16:11-12; Gen. 17:15-19; Jud. 13:2-7). A young man who comes to a well finds his future wife at the well (Genesis 29). A barren wife comes to have a child by divine intervention (Gen. 21:1-7; 1 Sam. 1:9-20). Type-scenes happen mostly to biblical heroes. Robert Alter, in his book *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, proposes that "there is a series of

Rebekah (Gen. 25:23) predicts the future of the unborn Esau and Jacob. Gen. 25:23 reads:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לָהּ שְׁנֵי גוֹיִם בְּבִטְנֵךְ וּשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֵּעַיִךְ יִפָּרֵדוּ וּלְאֹם מִלְאֹם יֶאֱמָץ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר׃

And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples shall be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger." (Gen. 25:23 NASB)

This four-fold divine oracle is, in its nature, ambiguous and enigmatic. Does this oracle need to be taken literally? How can babies in a mother's womb be described as two nations and two peoples?[133] As I have briefly reviewed, scholars such as S. R. Driver, Claus Westermann, and John R. Bartlett have related this divine oracle (Gen. 25:23) exclusively to the political relationship between the two nations Israel and Edom, and to Israel's superiority over Edom (hence, Jacob's superiority over Esau).[134] As Jacob is named *Israel* by a mysterious deity at the Jabbok (Gen. 33:28) and Esau is also called *Edom* throughout the Esau-Jacob cycle (Gen. 25:30; 36:1), there is a level of implication about the national elements within the Esau-Jacob narrative. However, the interpretation of this divine oracle need not be restricted to the national or political elements in the Esau-Jacob narrative. If one relates this divine oracle exclusively to Edom and Israel, not to Esau and Jacob, then all particulars of the Esau-Jacob story must be explainable when one applies them to the history of the two nations. However, although many

recurrent narrative episodes attached to the careers of biblical heroes that are analogous to Homeric type-scenes in that they are dependent on the manipulation of a fixed constellation of predetermined motifs." For further discussion, see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 51.

[133]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 175. Wenham mentions "peoples" only.

[134]For example, S.R. Driver assumes that the future which Gen. 25:23 predicts is not the future of Jacob and Esau, but of Israel and Edom. For further discussion, see Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 247; Similarly, Claus Westermann understands that the oracle indicates tribal history, not family history. See Westermann, *The Promises to the Fathers*, 80–1; Bartlett, "The Brotherhood of Edom," 19; Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 412–3.

Genesis commentators tend to interpret the divine oracle in a political sense, this kind of political interpretation cannot be applied to all the narrative contents. For example, as previously mentioned, there have been few political interpretations of the humiliating portrayal of Jacob as calling Esau a lord or bowing down to Esau seven times in Genesis 32 and 33. This would imply a subservience of Israel to Edom, which commentators are uneasy about endorsing.

The divine oracle given to Rebekah can be understood at two different levels, one referring to two nations[135] and the other to two brothers. Gen. 25:23 may primarily predict the future of two nations and two peoples, but in the narrative context this oracle is also related to Esau and Jacob as two individuals. Scholars who interpret Gen. 25:23 exclusively at a national level have not given their attention to how and to what degree the narrative roles that Esau and Jacob play within the narrative are related to this divine oracle. The Esau-Jacob narrative is in fact more concerned with Esau and Jacob as individuals rather than the ancestors of the two nations. The influence of the divine oracle at an individual level needs to be considered to understand Esau's narrative role in the narrative context.

Previously, I have stated the importance of the divine oracle given to Rebekah in Gen. 25:23 as one of the crucial elements in understanding Esau's narrative purpose within the narrative.[136] For first-time readers, the divine

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[135]Although the two nations will originate from Rebekah, the divine oracle (Gen. 25:23) predicts that one nation will be stronger than the other nation. Which nations does the phrase "two nations" refer to and which nation will be stronger? In the Hebrew Bible, the phrase "two nations" only appear in the book of Ezekiel (Ezek. 35:10; 37:22) outside Genesis. Israel and Judah are called "two nations" in the book of Ezekiel, but interpreting "two nations" in this oracle as Israel and Judah is unlikely because in the Esau-Jacob narrative the narrator never relates Jacob and Esau as the etymological ancestors of Israel and Judah. Rather, the narrator connects Jacob with Israel, and Esau with Edom.

[136]Isaac's blessing for Esau (Gen. 27:39-40) is also one of the crucial elements in understanding Esau's narrative purpose within the narrative.

oracle in Gen. 25:23 encourages them to bear in mind when and how this oracle will be fulfilled within the Esau-Jacob story. This divine oracle casts its influence over the entire Esau-Jacob story. Jan P. Fokkelman states that the divine oracle in Gen. 25:23 obliges readers to read all the events of Jacob's life in the light of this oracle.[137] Fokkelman also lists several possible questions that this divine oracle raises for readers: could it really happen that "the older serves the younger"? How will it come about? How will the parents behave?[138] Although Fokkelman seems to understand this oracle as focusing on Jacob only, in the same way the divine oracle encourages readers to read all the events of *Esau*'s life in this light.

Although the divine oracle is very important in understanding Esau's narrative role, many Genesis commentators and scholars have understood it simply as showing God's election of Jacob or determining Esau and Jacob's destiny (e.g. Jacob's supremacy over Esau).[139] However, the interpretation of this oracle in relation to the lives of Esau and Jacob is not that simple. While Fokkelman regards the divine oracle given to Rebekah as unambiguous,[140] R. Christopher Heard pertinently points out that the oracle is not unambiguous as to who will serve whom.[141] Given that the divine oracle can be interpreted as predicting the future of the unborn Esau and Jacob, one of the significant questions in understanding Esau's narrative role is who will serve whom

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[137]See Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 94. Similarly, Laurence A. Turner, in his *Announcement of Plot in Genesis,* points out that the divine oracle is an important plot announcement. See Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 115.

[138]Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 94.

[139]For example, Bruce K. Waltke comments, "Jacob owes his supremacy to sovereign election, not natural rights (see 37:2; 38:29; 48:5, 19; Deut. 21:15-17). See Waltke, *Genesis*, 358; Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 179; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 177.

[140]Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 89.

[141]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 99.

according to this oracle. Most Genesis commentators have not considered this ambiguity carefully, and consequently they have taken the easy path of interpreting it negatively and unfavourably in relation to Esau.

The last part of the divine oracle given to Rebekah (Gen. 25:23) is generally translated as "the older will serve the younger" (for example, NIV, NRSV, RSV, ASV, KJV). Most translators and Genesis commentators take this translation for granted,[142] but this translation itself overlooks the ambiguities embedded in the Hebrew text and shows the scholarly tendency to read the Esau-Jacob story in favour of Jacob who is chosen by God. As Esau the older never serves Jacob the younger in the subsequent narrative, this interpretation also conflicts with the overall plot development. The last part of the divine oracle is difficult to translate mainly in terms of Hebrew vocabulary and syntax.

The Ambiguity of Hebrew Words

The ambiguity rests on several factors. First of all, the choice of Hebrew words for the older and the younger in the last part of Gen. 25:23 (וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר) is very peculiar. The terms רַב and צָעִיר used in Gen. 25:23 are usually not the specific terms to refer to "the older" and "the younger" of a pair of characters. Rather, these are more general terms for "the older" and "the younger" sections of a community.[143] Scholars such as Gordon J. Wenham claim that the term רַב used here for "the older" also occurs in Akkadian texts of the mid-second millennium B.C. from Nuzi, Alalah, Ugarit, and Assyria

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[142]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 98. See von Rad, *Genesis*, 264 ; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 175; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 177; Speiser, *Genesis*, 193; Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 245; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 289; Skinner, *Genesis*, 359; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 411.

[143]Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 99.

with the same meaning.[144] However, we cannot know for sure whether the term רַב based on Semitic roots would necessarily connote identical meaning in these different cultures. Within the Hebrew Bible, the nuance of רַב is literally closer to "many" or "great" rather than "the older". The term צָעִיר can be also translated literally as something like "few" or "little" rather than "the younger".[145] These two terms can connote either numbers (many / few) or status (great / less). Therefore, more literal translations of Gen. 25:23 would be either "the many will serve the few" or "the greater will serve the lesser." The Greek translation of Gen. 25:23 in the Septuagint also supports this translation. The Hebrew terms רַב and צָעִיר are replaced with Greek terms μείζων[146] (greater / larger) and ἐλάσσονι[147] (lesser / smaller). Paul's quotation of Gen. 25:23 in Rom. 9:12 also follows the Septuagint's choice of words.

If the Genesis author intends to indicate clearly "the older" and "the younger" in this divine oracle, why does not the author use more specific terms for "the older" and "the younger"? In the book of Genesis, גָּדוֹל and קָטֹן are more frequently used specific terms than רַב and צָעִיר to refer to the older and the younger (cf. Gen. 27:15, 42; 29:16, 18; 48:19). The term צָעִיר can also refer to the younger (cf. Gen. 19:31, 34, 35, 38; 29:26; 48:14), but in this case this term is used with more specific terms for the older such as בְּכוֹר (first-born, בְּכִירָה in feminine form) or גָּדוֹל (the older), not with the same general term רַב.[148] If the Genesis author had used more specific terms for "the older" and "the younger," there would be only one possibility for readers: to identify Esau

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[144]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 176.

[145]See F. Brown, et al., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With An Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (9th printing; Repr. from the 1906 ed.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2005), #6810 and #7227.

[146]adjective nominative masculine singular comparative from μέγας.

[147]adjective dative masculine singular comparative from ἐλαχύς.

[148]See Gen. 19:31, 34; 29:26; 48:14.

as "the older" and Jacob as "the younger". However, when the author uses more general terms "the many (or the greater)" and "the few (or the lesser)," this gives more possibility of identifying Esau either as "the greater" or "the lesser" in terms of the oracle.

If one takes the translation "the older will serve the younger," the divine oracle itself will be apparently self-contradictory because the divine oracle mentions nations and peoples first. Why does the divine speech then suddenly change its focus from two nations/two peoples to "the older" and "the younger"? In what sense are the nations "older" or "younger"? Translating וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר as "the older will serve the younger" does not fit well within the context of Gen. 25:23. If one translates the Hebrew words more literally in the context of contrasting the nations, either "the greater will serve the lesser" or "the many will serve the few" would be more plausible translations. In translating the divine oracle, there is, however, another area that we need to consider carefully.

The Ambiguity of the Hebrew Syntax

In the last part of Gen. 25:23, וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר , it is syntactically difficult to determine the subject and object of the verb עָבַד , *to serve*. This divine oracle does not explicitly indicate who will serve whom, because neither "the older" nor "the younger" is used with any direct object marker. The translation of וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר therefore could legitimately be "the younger will serve the older." Although this textual difficulty is clear, most Genesis commentators have not given their attention to it and simply take רַב as the subject of the verb עָבַד , *to serve*. A few scholars such as Richard Elliott Friedman, Robert Alter, and R. Christopher Heard, however, do point out that the absence of direct object marker in רַב and צָעִיר makes it difficult to determine the subject and

object of the verb עָבַד , *to serve*.[149] As both רַב and צָעִיר agree in number and gender, the form of the verb alone cannot help deciding who will serve whom.[150]

In Hebrew, normal word order for a verbal sentence is taken to be *V-S-O (Verb-Subject-Object)*. There are, however, frequent variations and exceptions to this "normal" word order such as *V-O-S, O-V-S, S-O-V,* and *O-S-V*.[151] The generally accepted translation "the older will serve the younger," however, belongs to the *S-V-O (Subject-Verb-Object)* pattern which is not normal in Hebrew. The *O-V-S (Object-Verb-Subject)* pattern is more common than the *S-V-O (Subject-Verb-Object)* pattern. The choice of translating וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר as "the older will serve the younger" is therefore a peculiar option against the more usual word order for Hebrew verbal sentences.[152] Furthermore, as we have seen, translating רַב and צָעִיר as "the older" and "the younger" runs contrary to its narrative context. Within the Esau-Jacob narrative, Esau never serves Jacob. First-time readers may be perplexed by the odd syntax in the last part of the oracle, but it is more likely that they will read this part as the more common *O-V-S (Object-Verb-Subject)*

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[149]Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 88; Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 127; Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 99.

[150]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 99.

[151]For further discussion, see E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, eds., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910), §142.

[152]For further discussion, see Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 99. Heard also comments, "Of course, the line could be parsed as if it began with a nominative absolute (*casus pendens*), but it lacks the normal syntactical markers of a nominative absolute, such as a shift to an independent clause with its own explicit subject ("As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai," Gen. 17:15) or a pleonastic pronoun ("As for Esau, he is Edom," Gen. 36:8) (see Waltke and O'Connor: §§4.7b-c, 8.4b, 33.24a, 37.5a, 38.2d). The lack of such markers does not mean that *wĕreb* in v. 23bβ *cannot* be read as a nominative absolute, but it does mean that such a reading, while possible, is not necessary."

pattern.[153] From a syntactical point and narrative context of the Esau-Jacob narrative, "the younger will serve the older" would be a more plausible option for translation.

Suggestion for an Alternative Translation and Its Implications

In view of Hebrew vocabulary and syntax in Gen. 25:23, the traditional translation "the older will serve that younger" needs to be re-considered because it simply assumed Jacob's supremacy over Esau in favour Jacob without considering the textual difficulty there. By taking the terms רַב and צָעִיר literally and normal word order for וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר , I suggest that accepting a more plausible translation for the last part of Gen. 25:23 would be "the lesser will serve the greater" or "the few will serve the many." If one translates the divine oracle given to Rebekah this way, the divine oracle becomes not only internally consistent but also consistent with the larger context of the Esau-Jacob narrative.

First of all, this alternative translation fits well within the content of the divine oracle. The import of this divine oracle is about two nations and two peoples unless one takes the translation "the older will serve the younger" for granted. Do the older and the younger refer to only "Esau and Jacob" as the two individuals instead of two nations or two peoples? Why does the divine oracle suddenly mention the older and the younger at an individual level, turning the subject from two nations and two peoples at a national level? If one translates וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר either as "the lesser will serve the greater" or "the few will serve the many," this does not conflict with the content of the divine

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[153]R. Christopher Heard suggests a different option. Heard points out that the narrator has forced readers to make their own decisions about the sense of this sentence by using the ambiguous noun-verb-noun pattern in וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר with no direct object markers. He suggests that readers might expect that subsequent narrative will help them resolve the ambiguities here. See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 100.

oracle because this translation connotes both a national and an individual level. The lesser or the greater can refer to one of the two nations (or the two peoples). The lesser or the greater can also refer to either Esau or Jacob as individuals.

Secondly, translating the last part of Gen. 25:23 as "the lesser will serve the greater" or "the few will serve the many" is at least not contrary to the narrative context of the Esau-Jacob narrative. R. Christopher Heard points out that if we choose to translate וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר as "the younger will serve the older," Jacob's purchase of Esau's birthright and his theft of Esau's blessing seem to be contrary to the divine oracle.[154] However, we need to note that the divine oracle given to Rebekah does not necessarily predict that Jacob will steal Esau's birthright and blessing from him. The oracle is not about in what way one will serve the other. It is simply about who will serve whom. The translation "the lesser will serve the greater" is a more plausible translation within the divine oracle and the larger Esau-Jacob narrative.

What difference does it make if one reads the divine oracle either as "the lesser will serve the greater" or "the few will serve the many"? Does it mean that Jacob will serve Esau, or vice versa? In this alternative translation, "the lesser" does not necessarily refer to Jacob in a first-time reading. A first-time reader who does not know the plot development after Gen. 25:23 cannot know who will become the lesser, because the divine oracle does not predict who will become the lesser or the greater. A first-time reader even may not know that the lesser could imply both a nation and an individual. Readers will only know who the lesser is by reading the whole Esau-Jacob story. "The lesser will serve the greater" can imply that whoever the lesser is between Jacob and Esau (or between Israel and Edom at a national level), the lesser

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[154]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 100.

will serve the greater. The divine oracle is similar to the law of the jungle: the weak become the victims of the strong. The divine oracle given to Rebekah may be regarded as enigmatic in that it announces nations and peoples primarily while Rebekah has inquired about the babies in her womb, not about two nations. However, the nature of the divine oracle is consistent in itself and within the larger Esau-Jacob narrative as this oracle is a general statement. It is very common that the lesser will serve the greater (or the few will serve the many).

Reading the Divine Oracle in Its Narrative Context

In the Esau-Jacob narrative, if one has to decide who the lesser is between the two brothers, Jacob is after all portrayed as the lesser (or the few) before Esau.[155] When Jacob meets Esau after twenty years of separation (Genesis 32 and 33), Jacob calls himself "servant" before Esau (Gen. 32:4, 18, 20; 33:5, 13, 14). Jacob bows down to Esau and he addresses Esau as "my lord" (Gen. 33:13, 14), which implies that Jacob plays a role of the servant in relation to Esau. The number of Jacob's people as described in Genesis is also clearly fewer than Esau's four-hundred men. If either Jacob or Esau should serve the other, it is Jacob, not Esau. Jacob's people, the few, does not exceed in number Esau's people, the many.

I have challenged the traditional translation of the last part of the divine oracle given to Rebekah and suggested an alternative translation: [that is] the lesser will serve the greater. A majority of Genesis commentators and English translations understood the divine oracle as showing Jacob's supremacy over

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[155]If one considers the divine oracle at a national level, Edom (or the descendants of Esau) can be regarded as the lesser in other biblical traditions. David put all the garrisons in Edom and all the Edomites become servants to David (cf. 2 Sam. 8:14). From the time of David, Edom came under the control of Israel and Israel's rule over Edom lasts until the time of Jehoram (2 Kgs. 8:20-22).

Esau. Affected by this translation, which is favourable to Jacob, many Genesis commentators easily assume that Esau in the Esau-Jacob narrative is destined to serve Jacob by the divine oracle. However, as I have argued, ambiguous Hebrew words and syntax in the last part of the divine oracle reasonably suggest that this oracle does not necessarily predict Esau's servanthood to Jacob from the outset.

2. Esau Being Red, Hairy, and a Skillful Hunter

> *The first [Esau] came forth* ***red****, all his body* ***like a hairy mantle****; so they called his name Esau . . . When the boys grew up, Esau was* ***a skillful hunter, a man of the field****, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. (Gen. 25:25-27 RSV)*

Under the influence of modern mass media such as films and television programs, we are accustomed to receive information visually. In reading modern novels, we often expect to be helped to imagine the outward appearances of characters by detailed visual descriptions. However, the Hebrew narratives show entirely different characteristics in treating biblical characters, and modern readers are often struck by the terseness of the characterisation in the biblical narratives. We as readers do not have much information about what many of our biblical characters looked like. In the book of Genesis, we do not know the outward appearances of Adam, Eve, Abraham, Isaac, and so on. Therefore, when our narrator does provide the physical description of a character, we need to pay close attention to it.

Most birth stories in the biblical narratives are not interested in describing the outward appearance of a newborn. In the Esau-Jacob story, however, the narrator unusually portrays Esau's outward appearance: אַדְמוֹנִי כֻּלּוֹ כְּאַדֶּרֶת שֵׂעָר, *being red, all his body like a hairy mantle* (Gen. 25:25). Although it is only later that the description of Jacob's physical appearance is

explained through the speech of Jacob himself, the narrator directly highlights Esau's outward appearance from the outset.[156] It means for the first-time readers that Esau is portrayed as the more interesting or exceptional character than Jacob.

In addition to his outward appearance, another characteristic attributed to Esau is אִישׁ יֹדֵעַ צַיִד אִישׁ שָׂדֶה , *a skillful hunter, a man of the field* (Gen. 25:27). Many Genesis commentators have not emphasised the positive nature of these descriptions attributed to Esau, but I will argue that Esau's outward appearance and characteristic as a skillful hunter highlight Esau's character as a favourable and promising patriarch. The description of Esau itself shows that Esau is portrayed as a manly, good-looking, and promising patriarch for the first time readers.

Being Red

Most Genesis commentators have not read the description of Esau's outward appearances favourably. With regard to Esau's ruddiness, Genesis commentators such as Victor P. Hamilton, Nahum M. Sarna and John Skinner argue that the narrator describes Esau as being red and thus intends to allude to Edom and its characteristic red soil.[157] However, this type of historical interpretation assumes that the story of Esau and Jacob exists in order to explain the national history of Edom and Israel. It is not clear from the text that the narrator alluded to Edom's territory by describing Esau as being reddish. The description of Esau as being red implies more than the allusion to

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[156]According to Gen. 27:11, Jacob says that "I am a smooth man." In the birth scene of twin brothers, the narrator describes Jacob's action of gripping Esau's heel (Gen. 25:26) instead of Jacob's outward appearance.

[157]For further discussion, see Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 246; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 289–90; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 178; Sarna, *Genesis*, 180; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 176; Skinner, *Genesis*, 359; Speiser, *Genesis*, 195; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 414.

the red soil of Edom's territory. Although the term אַדְמוֹנִי, *red* is related to soil or earth, we need to understand what the narrator shows first by portraying Esau this way.

Few Genesis commentators have considered any positive aspect of Esau's portrayal as "red." Commentators such as David W. Cotter and Hermann Gunkel highlight the negative implications. Cotter relates Esau's redness to his hair and suggests that red hair is a sign of boorishness and it shows Esau's uncouthness.[158] Gunkel assumed that Esau's ruddiness can be understood as funny from the viewpoint of the Israelite narrator and audience.[159] More negatively, the rabbis emphasise that Esau's red colour indicates his bloodthirsty nature.[160]These interpretations contain polemic based on the outward appearance of Esau.

Contrary to the above interpretations, being ruddy elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible does not show any amusing or cruel image of a person. Rather, Esau's redness associates him with a heroic figure like David. Esau and David are the only two characters in the Hebrew Bible who are portrayed as אַדְמוֹנִי, *red* (Gen. 25:25; 1 Sam. 16:12; 17:42).[161] It is not likely that the narrator in 1 Samuel has portrayed David as being ruddy for the purpose of emphasising David's stupid, bloodthirsty, and funny characteristics. Certainly, commentaries on 1 Samuel do not see the description of David's ruddiness in

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[158]See Cotter, *Genesis*, xxx, 189.

[159]Gunkel comments, "The legend offers humorous glosses for the names Edom and Seir. The reddish-brown skin of the Edomites was amusing." See Gunkel, *Genesis*, 290.

[160]Cf. Genesis Rabbah 63:8. R. Abba bar Kahana said, "[He was red] because he was entirely a shedder of blood." See Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 357.

[161]Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 414; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 183.

this light.[162] The narrator here highlights the handsomeness and attractiveness of David by describing him as אַדְמוֹנִי , *red* along with other descriptions such as עִם־יְפֵה עֵינַיִם , *beautiful eyes* (1 Sam. 16:12), טוֹב רֹאִי , *good-looking* (1 Sam. 16:12), and עִם־יְפֵה מַרְאֶה , *handsome in appearance*.[163] Intertextuality between the ruddiness of Esau and David opens a possibility of viewing Esau as a heroic, or at least an attractive figure. According to Cyrus H. Gordon, evidence from Egypt and Crete also supports the observation that ruddy men (or men who are coloured reddish brown) often assume heroic and ceremonial purposes.[164] In addition to a narrative connection with David by Esau's

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[162]For example, Mary J. Evans comments, "He [David] was good-looking, maybe with a country boy's tan, and it is easy to understand that David's attractiveness inspired great love and loyalty." Similarly, Robert P. Gordon comments, "David was handsome — doubtless to be interpreted as a sign of divine favour (cf. Ex. 2:2; Acts 7:20). — without having the physical proportions of a Saul or an Eliab (cf. 17:42 (?))." See Mary J. Evans, *1 and 2 Samuel* (New International Biblical Commentary; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000), 82; Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 151; Cf. Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel* (WBC 10; Waco: Word Books, 1983), 161; P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *I Samuel: A New Translation with Instruction, Notes, and Commentary* (Anchor Bible; New York: Double Day, 1980), 275–6.

[163]In regard to Esau's ruddiness, Susan Niditch highlights its positive nature. Niditch comments, "The term for "red", *'edōm*, is related to the term for the earth, a ruddy substance. The name of the first human, Adam, a term that can be translated humanity, also means earthling. Esau's redness is indeed related to the redness of the sandstone rich land of the Edomites (notice the root for "redness"), descended from him in the tradition and located to the east and south of Israel. Redness thus suggests earthiness, fecundity, and humanity. It is positive for a young man to be called ruddy. The handsomeness of the young hero David is equated with being *'admônî*, ruddy, the same form of the redness root that describes Esau." See Susan Niditch, "Dancing with Chains and the Ambiguity of Power: Women's Voices in the Hebrew Bible" (Paper presented at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, 2007), 12. Susan Niditch presented this paper for the Phyllis Trible Lecture Series at Wake Forest University. I gained the copy of this paper by e-mail and cite it with her permission.

[164]Cyrus H. Gordon comments, "All over the ancient East, as we have observed, red (actually reddish brown) is the colour appropriate for men, and yellow, for women, The frequency of red ochre and yellow ochre in excavated towns, suggests that men and women painted themselves with the appropriate colour of ochre. On the paintings of Egypt and Crete, red men and yellow women are quite familiar. The warriors on Etruscan paintings are red. Kret rouged himself to become ceremonially fit. And the two of the most heroic men of the Old Testament, Esau and David, are described as naturally red: showing that they were born to be heroes." See Cyrus H. Gordon, *Before the Bible: The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilisations* (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1962), 230–31. Cf. Cyrus H. Gordon, *The Ancient Near East* (3rd ed.; New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965), 125. n.26.

ruddiness, the term אַדְמוֹנִי , *red* also links Esau with אָדָם , *Adam*, which can also mean humanity. The similarity in the word stem here also opens a possibility of viewing Esau positively in connection with Adam, the first man whom God had formed from the dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). Being red or ruddy need not be regarded as negative or unfavourable. In other contexts, it is favourable and positive for a young man to be portrayed as ruddy. This does not necessarily need to exclude a newborn. R. Christopher Heard suggests that Esau's reddish appearance may be a "temporary after-effect of the birth process" caused by his mother's blood and fluids.[165] Although this is an interesting idea, we need to note that most babies are covered with bloods and fluids at the outset. Jacob's birth process would be pretty much the same. It is improbable that the Genesis narrator was interested in the temporary appearance of a newborn. It would be more plausible to take it as describing Esau's permanent appearance as being ruddy.

Being Hairy

The humorous British improvisation group "Fireside Theatre" in the 1970s presented a skit where an Anglican pastor, parodically speaking in an Oxbridge accent, delivered a sermon "My brother Esau is an hairy man and I am a smooth man." The title of this sermon was taken from the biblical text, but the sermon has taken this verse out of its context and becomes silly.[166] There is an underlying assumption of making fun of Esau's hairiness here, which shows the trend of viewing hairiness in a negative way.

As with Esau's reddishness, Esau's hairiness has been understood negatively or unfavourably. Many Genesis commentators have understood that

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[165]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 101.

[166]This information comes from Niditch, "Dancing with Chains," 11.

Esau's hairiness is a sign of incivility. For example, Bruce Vawter comments, "Hairiness or shagginess seems to have been *eo ipso* a mark of incivility."[167] David W. Cotter, whom I cited in the previous section, again suggests that hairiness underlines the impression of boorishness and uncouthness.[168] More negatively, the rabbis understood Esau's hairiness as the mark of a sinner.[169] These interpretations have not given any thought to the positive and favourable appearance of Esau's hairiness. Esau's hairiness need not be a sign of incivility nor a mark of a sinner. Rather, Esau's hairiness may show his heroic character and manliness. Esau's hairiness intertextually associates him with heroic characters such as Elijah and Samson in the Hebrew Bible.

In the Hebrew Bible, hairiness is closely related to special and heroic status. Susan Niditch emphasises this positive nature of Esau's hairiness as follows:

> In Hebrew Scriptures and ancient Israelite culture there is an important nexus between maleness, virility, warrior status, and special chosen status that emerges in attitudes to hair in the Nazirism of Samson and Samuel, in the pretensions of the would-be king/hero Absalom, and in the poetic implications of Judg. 5:2 and Deut. 32:42. Hair is an entryway to an appreciation of views of Israelite identity, concepts of holiness, and attitudes to gender and is integral to the ways in which biblical writers project and construct ideas of self-definition.[170]

As Niditch shows by relating hair to maleness, virility, warrior status, and special chosen status, being hairy has not been regarded negatively in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israelite culture. It rather shows a positive image.

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[167]Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (London: Geoffrey Chapman Book, 1977), 288.

[168]Cotter, *Genesis*, xxx-xxxi.

[169]cf. Genesis Rabbah 65:15. See H. Freedman, *Genesis II*, 590–1.

[170]Niditch, "Dancing with Chains," 8–9.

Furthermore, Esau's hairiness is portrayed as כֻּלּוֹ כְּאַדֶּרֶת שֵׂעָר , *all his (body) like a hairy mantle* (Gen. 25:25). According to Zech. 13:4, the hairy mantle (or the hairy garment) is the garment of prophets. Although Zech. 13:4 alludes to the false prophets in the context, the hairy mantle is associated with the distinctive appearance of prophets.[171] If Esau resembles the appearance of King David in his ruddiness and his hairiness is described as being like the garment of prophets, it is not impossible to view Esau's outward appearance as suggesting that he is a figure like a kingly prophet.[172] This may be overstating the case but at least shows that it cannot be taken for granted that Esau's hairiness is a mark of incivility in the Hebrew Bible.

Esau, a man of hair, is intertextually connected with Elijah, a hairy man, (2 Kgs. 1:8) and Samson a long-haired man[173] (Judg. 13:5; 16:17). When the king Ahaziah asked his messengers about the appearance of Elijah, Elijah is introduced as "a hairy man with a leather belt around his waist" (2 Kgs. 1:7-8). When Elijah was taken up to heaven, Elisha picked up Elijah's mantle and it gives Elijah miraculous powers such as dividing the water (2 Kgs 2:13-4).[174] After Elisha inherited Elijah's garment, Elisha too was able to perform miracles. We do not know for sure that Elijah's mantle was hairy, but Zech. 13:4 suggests that the prophets used to wear a hairy mantle. In association with Elijah and Elisha, the characteristics of hairiness and wearing a hairy

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[171]See Gerda Hoekveld-Meijer, *Esau: Salvation in Disguise. Genesis 36: A Hidden Polemic Between Our Teacher and the Prophets About Edom's Role in Post-Exilic Israel Through Leitwort Names* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 79; Cf. Niditch, "Dancing with Chains," 12–3.

[172]Hoek-veld Meijer calls Esau a kingly prophet. Giving Gen. 25:19-28 the title of "The birth of the kingly prophet", Hoekveld-Meijer comments, "The ruler of Edom and Israel is not a crowned priest, a Melchizedek (who sacrifices for himself), but a kingly prophet: a mixture of David as a young boy and Elijah. See Hoekveld-Meijer, *Esau: Salvation in Disguise*, 79.

[173]Although the biblical text does not say that Samson has long hair, the fact that he has never taken a razor to his head hints that he must have a long hair.

[174]Niditch, "Dancing with Chains," 12.

mantle can be viewed as contributing to a positive, heroic, and miraculous image.

The imagery of hair in the Samson story is similar. Although the Samson narrative indicates that the source of Samson's miraculous power comes from רוּחַ יְהוָה , *the Spirit of the LORD* (Judg. 14:6, 19; 15:14), his hair is still a symbol of divine power for Samson (Judg. 16:17-19, 22). When Samson's hair was shaved off, his miraculous power departed (Judg. 16:19). The narrator's comment, "But the hair of his head began to grow after it had been shaved" (Judg. 16:22), gives the hint in the Samson narrative that Samson's miraculous power will be back once his hair grows again. As he was a Nazirite of God, Samson's hair, which should not be shaved off and therefore must be long hair, is not presented in his narrative as having any negative or unfavourable image.[175] It is a sign of loyalty to God.

As Susan Niditch points out, there is a question whether we can equate Esau's hairiness with long hair on the head or beard,[176] but either way it is still hard to deny a special and positive attitude given to hair in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israelite culture. Niditch says:

> Perhaps like the redness, the hair mantle suggests closeness to the natural end of the nature/culture continuum, evoking an animal covered with hair. The deity himself appears to holy men on mountains, in the wilderness. When we add to these considerations the generally positive views of having lots of hair in the tales of the Hebrew Bible and especially the heroic, manly dimensions implied by

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[175]Absalom's beauty also seems to be related to his long hair. 2 Sam. 14:25-26 reads, "Now in all Israel there was no one to be praised so much for his beauty as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. And when he cut the hair of his head (for at the end of every year he used to cut it; when it was heavy on him, he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head, two hundred shekels by the king's weight." Although both Samson and Absalom are both ambiguous figures themselves, it is clear that their long hair certainly does have positive attributes. For Samson, it is a sign of loyalty to God and a symbol of his miraculous power. For Absalom, it is related to his beauty.

[176]Niditch, "Dancing with Chains," 16.

> tales of Samson and other hairy men, we must conclude that at the outset Esau looked like a promising patriarch.[177]

I am totally in agreement with Niditch's suggestion that Esau looked like a promising patriarch at the outset. Many Genesis commentators have not emphasised the positive and favourable nature of Esau's hairiness, but it seems to be affected by their modern conception of hairiness as a mark of primitiveness. In modern Western society, where many men prefer to shave and do not let hair grow long in order to look neat and tidy, hairiness could be regarded as being behind the times. In the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israelite culture, however, hair is the symbol of power and charismatic status. It also symbolises the manliness of a person. It is a shame for Israelites to have their hair or beard cut by force as suggested by the case of David's servants being humiliated by Hanun, a king of Ammorites, when Hanun has shaved off the beards of David's servants (2 Sam. 10:1-5). The fact that they have remained in Jericho until their beards grow shows that loss of hair or beards is dishonourable for the Israelites. As implied by the above occasions, Jacob's portrayal as a smooth man, in contrast to Esau, shows how far Jacob is from manliness. Jacob calls himself a smooth man (Gen. 27:11) and this is his own expression of recognising himself as being far from manliness. At least from outward appearances, Esau is more appealing than the effeminate appearance of Jacob. Therefore, the narrator's description of Jacob is very ironic: he (or she) is not always favourable to the founding father of Israel.

Esau's hairiness is not just associated with heroic characters in the Hebrew Bible, but in other ancient Near Eastern traditions. For example, Esau's hairiness connects him with the semi-human Enkidu in the Gilgamesh epic who is portrayed in the following terms: "shaggy with hair is his whole

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[177]Niditch, "Dancing with Chains," 13.

body".[178] Although commentators such as E. A. Speiser and Claus Westermann do point out that Esau is portrayed as an Enkidu-figure,[179] they have not highlighted the heroic nature of this outward appearance and have undervalued the significance of Esau's hairiness.[180] As Enkidu is semi-human, it is still questionable whether we can definitely see Enkidu quite on a human level. However, there is no doubt that heroic figures — whether a human or a semi-human figure — are portrayed as hairy in ancient Near Eastern culture.

From a common sense point of view, we expect that twin brothers will be alike in their outward appearance and character[181] but Esau and Jacob are surprisingly portrayed differently. While Esau's hairiness is favourable and gives him a heroic outward appearance, Jacob's outward appearance has not been highlighted by the narrator in the Esau-Jacob story. The portrayal of Jacob as having less hair shows his inferior status to Esau at the outset. When Jacob says, "Behold, Esau my brother is a man of hair, and I am a smooth man" (Gen. 27:11), this is not just a statement of fact. It indicates that Jacob has a sense of inferiority to his hairy brother Esau. The term חָלָק , *smooth* is neither a positive nor a complimentary word. It means not only having less hair but also "the slipperiness of the trickster."[182] The book of Proverbs warns of פֶּה חָלָק , *smooth speech* (or flattering mouth; Prov. 26:28).

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[178]See "The Epic of Gilgamesh," translated by E. A. Speiser (*ANET*, 74).

[179]Speiser, *Genesis*, 196. Speiser comments, "Yet J is still able to depict Esau as a sort of Enkidu figure: the child emerges "like a hairy mantle all over," which is almost the same as "shaggy with hair was his whole body," applied to Enkidu in Gilg., Tablet I, column ii, line 36 (where the phrase *šu'ur šārta* is cognate with Heb. *śē'ār*); and Esau, like Enkidu, is a man of the open spaces." Cf Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 414.

[180]Although Westermann introduces a link between Esau and Οὐσῶος in Philo of Byblos suggested by F. Delitzsch, he has not emphasised the significance of Esau's hairiness further. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 414.

[181]For example, Simeon and Levi in Gen. 49:5 are described as alike. Cf. Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born*, 84–5.

[182]Niditch, "Dancing with Chains," 15.

In my reading, Esau's hairiness is related to his manliness and appealing character while Jacob's lack of hair is related to his effeminate and slippery character. It would be more appropriate to see that our Genesis narrator portrayed Esau as behaving more like a man than Jacob does.[183] We need to see Esau's hairiness within the Israelite context which values hair and see hair in the context of male leadership and power. Hair is the symbol of manliness, divine power and special status. There is a close relationship between hairiness and manliness in the Hebrew Bible.

Esau, a Skillful Hunter and a Man of the Field

Today, we live in society where people often regard one's profession as a means of judging one's identity or value. Medical doctors, lawyers, mayors, judges, or professors are generally respected professions in many countries. Then, how was a hunter as a profession understood in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israelite culture? What kind of image does Esau show as a skillful hunter or a man of the field? In the Esau-Jacob narrative, Esau is introduced as אִישׁ יֹדֵעַ צַיִד אִישׁ שָׂדֶה , *a man who knows hunting—a man of the field* (Gen. 25:27). Here Esau is introduced in terms of his occupation: a hunter, a man of the field.

Historical-critical scholars such as Gerhard von Rad, Claus Westermann and Nahum M. Sarna have understood that Esau's lifestyle as a hunter represents nomadic lifestyle while Jacob as a shepherd represents semi-nomadic lifestyle in Palestine at certain period of history.[184] This group of

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[183]As Jacob becomes the founding father of Israel, Susan Niditch suggests that the Israelite writer seems to identify with Jacob the less hairy man. See Niditch, "Dancing with Chains," 18. However, I think that the narrator also shows polemic against Jacob the founding father of Israel at some level.

[184]Cf. von Rad, *Genesis*, 265–66; Skinner, *Genesis*, 361; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 414–5; Sarna, *Genesis*, 181; Donald B. Sharp, "In Defense of Rebecca," *BTB* 10 (1980): 165.

scholars believes that the story of Esau and Jacob favours the more stable and established lifestyle of Jacob as a herdsman. For example, John Skinner comments, "Jacob . . . chooses the half-nomadic pastoral life which was the patriarchal ideal."[185] Similarly, Sarna comments, "Hunting as a way of life was held in low esteem in Israel."[186] However, neither Esau's lifestyle as a hunter nor Jacob's lifestyle as a herdsman is idealised in the Esau-Jacob story. As nothing in the text explicitly states that one is better than the other, it is hard to argue that the Esau-Jacob narrative favours the lifestyle of Jacob as a shepherd or herdsman. The evidence to link Esau with any nomadic group is very flimsy. Furthermore, it is questionable whether hunting is confined only to nomads in ancient Near Eastern culture. People with a settled lifestyle must have needed to hunt from time to time.[187]

In addition to interpreting Esau as the representative of the nomadic lifestyle, other Genesis commentators such as Bruce K. Waltke understand that the description about Esau as a hunter hints at his crude, uncultured, or instinctual nature.[188] Waltke states that the phrase about Esau as a skillful hunter, a man of the open country is "an unfavourable description by biblical standards."[189] He further comments:

> While the law made provision for eating game, the biblical writers commend pastoralists and condemn predators. Nimrod, the founder of the cities that stood opposed to God, is identified as a mighty hunter (see 10:9). Later, Esau is described as one who lives by the sword (27:40). The biblical ideal for a leader is symbolized by that of a shepherd (Ps. 23; Ezek. 34; John 10:1-18; 1 Peter 5:3-4). True Israel, like his God, behaves like a shepherd, not a hunter.

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[185]Skinner, *Genesis*, 361.

[186]Sarna, *Genesis*, 181.

[187]Lev. 17:13 shows that Israelites did hunting as part of their life.

[188]Waltke, *Genesis*, 362.

[189]Waltke, *Genesis*, 362.

Waltke's comment shows a typically negative interpretation. Rabbinic interpretations also despise the image of Esau as a hunter as representing his cruelty. According to rabbinic tradition, Esau was known for killing Nimrod who was a mighty hunter before the LORD (Gen. 10:9). Esau comes to defeat Nimrod in order to prove his greater skills.[190] Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 24 records that Nimrod possessed the divine garments made for Adam and Eve which have a power to summon all the animals and birds, but says that Esau took them from Nimrod by killing him.[191] Although these interpretations comment on the image of Esau as a hunter unfavourably, being a hunter by profession does not necessarily convey a negative image in the Hebrew Bible. One model of leadership in the Bible may be that of the shepherd, but this does not mean that Israelites should never be hunters. There are also warnings against bad shepherds in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Ezekiel 34).

In the Hebrew Bible, we do not find many hunting scenes or hunters, which makes it difficult to figure out the value put on the image of the hunter. However, there is evidence that hunting itself was not necessarily a negative or unlawful activity. According to Lev. 17:13, the people of Israel used to hunt and eat animals and birds, but the law only prohibits eating their bloods. Lev. 17:13 shows that Israelites did hunting as part of their life. Furthermore, 1 Sirach 14:16 shows that the Israelite tradition has not universally taken the hunter as a symbol of crudity, lack of culture, or boorishness. 1 Sir. 14:16 reads, "Pursue wisdom like a hunter, and lie in wait on her paths." Here, a hunter is used as a positive example to emphasise an attitude to seek wisdom. The hunter is a model of someone who is patient and knows how to wait for an opportunity. Esau does not quite fit into this type of person, but what I am

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[190]Harry Freedman, "Jacob and Esau," 109.

[191]Quoted from Harry Freedman, "Jacob and Esau," 109. n.5.

emphasising here is that we need not judge any character negatively as many scholars have done simply from the fact that the character is a *hunter*. As supported by the above references, the image of hunter itself cannot be regarded as intrinsically negative or unfavourable. Generally, hunting is not a preferred profession in the Israelite tradition, but it does not necessarily mean that no one among the Israelites should be a hunter. In ancient Near Eastern art, where a king is portrayed as killing a lion with a spear, this hunting scene often symbolises the great power of a king or his conquering of chaos. Therefore, negative interpretations of Esau simply from the fact that Esau is a hunter are nothing more than bias.

In addition to his image as a skillful hunter, Esau is further described as אִישׁ שָׂדֶה, *a man of the field*. A skillful hunter does not necessarily equate with the man of the field. "A man of the field" is an additional description of Esau. Esau is the only character who is portrayed as a man of field.[192] The image of Esau as a man of the field is contrary to Jacob's portrayal in the Esau-Jacob narrative. שָׂדֶה means "open field", "home of beasts", "unfrequented land", or "an area exposed to violence."[193] Esau often stayed in such an environment.

In contrast, Jacob is portrayed as אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהָלִים , *a domesticated man who dwells in tents*. The term תָּם has various nuances such as "complete", "sound", "upright", or "perfect".[194] Most English translations read אִישׁ תָּם as "a quiet man" (ASV, ESV, JPS, NIV, NRSV, and RSV), but there are also other translations which read it as "a plain man" (KJV), "a peaceful man" (NASB), or "a mild man" (NKJ, TNK). A nuance such as "complete" or "perfect" does

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[192]Similarly, when Isaac meets Rebekah for the first time, he was portrayed as a man walking in the field. See Gen. 24:65. The phrase "the beasts of the field" often occur in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Gen. 2:19-20; 1 Sam. 17:44; 2 Sam. 21:10; Ps. 8:7; Jer. 27:6; Dan. 2:38; 4:12, 21).

[193]See Brown, et al., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, #7704.

[194]See Brown, et al., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, #8535.

not seem to fit with Jacob's character as a trickster. As the additional description of Jacob יֹשֵׁב אֹהָלִים , *dwelling in tents*, shows Jacob's domesticated lifestyle, it seems to be appropriate to translate אִישׁ תָּם as "quiet man" or "domesticated man."[195] While Jacob used to stay in tents, cooking and thus living in a woman's world,[196] Esau stayed in the field, living in a man's world as a skillful hunter.

These attributes of Esau clearly can be interpreted as showing a positive evaluation of Esau's character which should not be underestimated. Within the Esau-Jacob narrative, this positive valuation is explicit. Esau was loved by Isaac because his hunting skills (Gen. 25:28) brought game for his father. Furthermore, it is not likely that Esau hunted for Isaac alone. There is no reason to believe that Esau has not provided game for his whole family. His role is to supply provisions for the sake of his family. Esau was able to do the hunting which Isaac and Jacob seem to have not been able to do. A man in a man's world, the positive assessment of his character is reinforced in this episode.

3. What Does Esau Lose by Selling His Birthright?

In Gen. 25:27-34, the narrator provides us with an interesting episode wherein Esau, the firstborn, sells his בְּכֹרָה , *birthright* , for bread and lentil stew. With regard to his selling the birthright to Jacob, many Genesis commentators take it that Esau is being short-sighted and does not care much

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[195]As the Israelites have lived in the tents while they were wandering in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt, "dwelling in tents" could be related to non-settled life style. However, dwelling in tents in relation to Jacob does not seem to indicate that Jacob has not settled. It rather shows his indoor life style, preferring to stay in tents.

[196]In Balaam's third oracle upon the Israelites, Balaam says that "How lovely are your tents, O Jacob! Your dwellings, O Israel!" (Num. 24:5 NKJ). Dwelling in tents itself does not seem to convey a negative image. However, it is clearly not closer to a man's world.

about the future legacy or being the chosen one.[197] For example, according to Nahum M. Sarna, Esau is viewed as showing careless indifference to the sacred nature of the firstborn's special position in relation to God.[198] Moreover, Genesis commentators make the mistaken assumption that Jacob has cherished or valued the birthright while Esau has despised its preciousness, and they seek to accentuate the contrast between them. It could be right that Esau shows no concern or respect for the right of the firstborn at the time he sells his birthright to Jacob, but I would like to ask the question here, "And Jacob doesn't?" In my reading of this episode, neither Esau nor Jacob shows respect for the right of the firstborn.

A further irony that we need to consider while reading this story in the wider narrative context is what exactly Esau loses by selling his birthright (or what Jacob gains by buying the birthright). One may think that Esau comes to lose Isaac's blessing intended for him (Genesis 27),[199] but there is no clear causal relation between Esau's selling the birthright and Jacob's stealing Esau's blessing. Esau may have disqualified himself as a firstborn by selling his birthright to Jacob and he may be regarded as deserving to lose Isaac's blessing. However, we need to note that Esau loses his blessing as a firstborn because Jacob has stolen it, not because he has sold his birthright. The scheme to deceive Isaac and Esau is initiated by Rebekah and carried out by Jacob. Esau is simply a victim of this trick. The text never links the two events.

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[197]See Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 178; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 292–3; J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12–50* (International Theological Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 96; Skinner, *Genesis*, 362.

[198]See Sarna, *Genesis*, 182.

[199]Or, one may think that Esau deserves to leave Canaan, the land of promise, because of selling his birthright (Gen. 36:6-8). The aspect of Esau's leaving the promised land will be discussed in Chapter 6: Esau's Promised Land, Esau's Descendants.

In discussing what Esau lost by selling his birthright, we need to look at what the right of the firstborn is. How precious is Esau's birthright? The firstborn has a special social status in the Hebrew Bible. Along with the first fruits of the soil and every firstborn male of herds and flocks, the firstborn was considered to be sacred.[200] The firstborn is also accorded precedence over his brothers during his father's lifetime. In Gen. 49:3, Jacob addresses Reuben as "My might and the first fruit of my vigour, excelling in rank and excelling in power."[201] From the viewpoint of material benefits, the book of Genesis itself does not clearly mention what benefits a firstborn is entitled to receive. Genesis commentators such as Victor P. Hamilton and Gordon J. Wenham relate the right of the firstborn to Deuteronomy 21:15-17[202] wherein a father is obligated to grant the firstborn an inheritance that is twice as much as any other son(s) would receive.[203] Hamilton suggests that in patriarchal times the grant given to the firstborn may be greater than the double portion or two-thirds of Deut. 21:15-17, for Abraham gave Isaac everything that he had according to Gen. 25:5.[204] Although Isaac is not a firstborn and the benefits of the firstborn in Deut. 21:15-17 cannot precisely be applied to the patriarchal times, this biblical law at least gives an idea about what benefits the firstborn may have had.

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[200]See Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The World of the Bible in Light of History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 184; cf. Exod. 13:2; Num. 8:14-18; Deut. 15:19.

[201]See also Gen. 27:29, 37; Gen. 49:8; 2 Chr. 21:3.

[202]Deut. 21:15-17 reads: If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and [both] the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, if the first-born son belongs to the unloved, then it shall be in the day he wills what he has to his sons, he cannot make the son of the loved the first-born before the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn. But he will acknowledge the first-born, the son of the unloved by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; to him belongs to the right of the first-born (Deut. 21:15-17 NASB).

[203]For further discussion, see Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 185; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 178.

[204]Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 185.

According to Deut. 21:15-17, the right to receive the double portion is not all the firstborn is entitled to. There is also a right not to lose this precious birthright through a father's arbitrary decision. Deut. 21:15-17 shows the general rule of the primogeniture. This biblical law protects the right of the firstborn and prevents a father from giving the right of the firstborn to his favoured son. In contrast to the biblical law, other ancient Near Eastern documents regarding primogeniture show that the primacy of birth is a matter of the father's decision regardless of who is born first. A father can annul the birthright of the oldest son arbitrarily and transfer it upon a younger one. A Nuzi tablet indicates this incident by recording the statement of a father:

> As regards my son Zirteshup, I at first annulled his relationship; but now I have restored him into sonship. He is the elder son and a double share he shall receive . . . [205]

Similar to other ancient Near Eastern customs and against the Deuteronomic code, the Hebrew Bible also records several instances wherein the privilege of the firstborn is bestowed upon a younger son instead of an older son. For example, Abraham casts Ishmael out along with Hagar and gives all that he had to Isaac (Gen. 21:14; 25:5). The writer of Chronicles also reveals that Reuben's birthright is given to Joseph because Reuben has defiled his father's bed (cf. 1 Chr. 5:1; Gen. 49:3-4). However, the episode of Esau's selling his birthright is different from the above occasions. It is striking and even scandalous in that it is not a *father*, Isaac, who annuls or transfers the right of the firstborn but the *sons*, Jacob and Esau, who strike this bargain. If, according to the biblical tradition, the right of the firstborn should not be transferred to a favoured son by a father's arbitrary decision, it can be regarded as an unusual and shocking event for a younger brother to take the initiative

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[205]See E. A. Speiser, "New Kirkuk Documents Relating to Family Laws," *AASOR* 10 (1930): 39; quoted in Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 185–86.

and request an older brother to sell the birthright.[206] This is against the biblical law which protects the right of the firstborn. Reuben Ahroni, in his article "Why Did Esau Spurn the Birthright?", precisely points out the problematic nature of this birthright trade:

> What is remarkable in the narrative of the Jacob-Esau episode is not the mere transfer of the birthright from the elder to the younger son. Rather, it is the fact that, in this specific case, primogeniture was treated like any merchandise, subject to purchase through an agreement between the parties concerned — the seller and the buyer. And, indeed, this transfer of the birthright from Esau to Jacob is conducted like an ordinary commercial transaction. Esau literally barters away from his birthright. Moreover, this transaction is assumed to be valid even without the father's sanction or knowledge.[207]

As Ahroni points out, the right of the firstborn is not something that one son could sell or buy from another son without a father's sanction.[208] Most Genesis commentators assume that it is only Esau who has treated the birthright lightly, but in the same manner Jacob has not treated the birthright respectively.

Although the right of the firstborn is connected with social and material benefits, the irony is that Esau does not lose much by selling his

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[206]Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 183. Although Hamilton also points this out, he does not strongly criticise Jacob's actions. Hamilton comments, "It would be unusual for a younger son to take the initiative and request an elder brother to surrender his birthright."

[207]Reuben Ahroni, "Why Did Esau Spurn the Birthright? A Study in Biblical Interpretation," *Judaism* 29 (1980): 324.

[208]Another Nuzi text may challenge this view that Esau's selling and Jacob's buying the birthright without Isaac's sanction is a shocking and unusual event, because in this Nuzi text a man named Tupkitilla transfers his inheritance right to his brother Kurpazah in exchange for three sheep. The Nuzi text reads: On the day they divide the grove (that lies) on the road of the town of Lumti . . . , Tupkitilla shall give it to Kurpazah as his inheritance share (See Cyrus H. Gordon, "Biblical Customs and the Nuzi Tablets," *BA* 3 [1940]: 5; Quoted in Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 184). What Tupkitilla is giving to Kurpazah is, however, the inheritance right, not the birthright. Furthermore, the Nuzi text does not mention whether Tupkitilla is the elder brother or not (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 184). It is more than likely that Esau and Jacob's bargain of the birthright without the father's approval is an unusual event.

birthright, particularly in terms of receiving material inheritance from Isaac. Jacob seems to receive nothing from his father. The Esau-Jacob narrative does not indicate that Isaac has given any inheritance either to Esau or Jacob. Unlike Abraham, who gave all of his inheritance to Isaac, we do not have any account of Isaac giving an inheritance to his sons. When Abraham sends his oldest servant to Laban with an instruction to find a wife for Isaac, Abraham sends him with ten camels and gifts (Gen. 24:10). When Isaac sends Jacob to Laban with an instruction to take a wife among the daughters of Laban, he gives nothing but another blessing to Jacob (Gen. 28:1-5). Jacob himself acknowledges this later when he says, "with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan" (Gen. 32:11).[209] If Jacob had received an abundant inheritance from his father, he would not have had to tend Laban's flocks. The Esau-Jacob narrative indicates that Isaac did not give anything to Jacob. Although Gen. 26:12-14 indicates Isaac's wealth, neither Esau nor Jacob seems to come into possession of it.

If receiving a double portion of inheritance was the only benefit that a firstborn is entitled to receive from a father, then it means that Esau loses nothing even though Jacob has bought the right of the firstborn and has stolen the blessing intended for Esau. On the contrary, by the time Esau meets Jacob, Esau has already become the leader of four-hundred men (Gen. 32:6; 33:1). Four hundred men is even greater than the number of Abraham's trained men when he rescues Lot (Gen. 14:14). Esau has become a powerful patriarch. Several passages in Genesis also imply that Esau also had abundant possessions (Gen. 33:9; Gen. 36:7). What then exactly did Esau lose by selling his birthright? When Jacob meets Esau again, Jacob even addresses Esau as "my lord" (Gen. 33:13, 14). Esau's family status is not seen as lost by Jacob,

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[209]Ahroni, "Why Did Esau Spurn the Birthright?" 329.

who is the one who bought his birthright and even stole his blessing. The right of the firstborn as being supreme over other brothers is still at work in the episode of Esau and Jacob. Esau is still supreme over Jacob as his older brother even after twenty years of separation with his brother. Esau is still Jacob's older brother.

In my favourable reading of Esau, I do not deny that Esau might have shown no respect for the birthright by his willingness to sell it just for bread and lentil stew. Nevertheless, what I would like to emphasise is that the blame should not fall upon Esau only. As Ahroni points out, we need to note that Jacob did not risk much when he bought the birthright from his older brother. He gains the birthright for almost nothing—just some bread and a lentil stew.[210] From Jacob's point of view, the birthright is worth the value of bread and lentil stew. It is not worth more than that. Esau is not the only person who does not have respect for the birthright. Jacob also shows little respect for the birthright by treating it as merchandise and buying it cheaply.

Genesis commentators such as Victor P. Hamilton and Gordon J. Wenham assume that the narrator has criticised only Esau's deed by describing (or commenting on) it as "Thus Esau despised his birthright."[211] The last part of Gen. 25:34 reads: וַיִּבֶז עֵשָׂו אֶת־הַבְּכֹרָה, *and Esau ignored the birthright* (my translation). Most English translations (e.g. KJV, NKJ, NASB, NRSV, RSV, NIV, etc.) read this part as *Thus Esau despised his birthright* as most Genesis

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[210]Ahroni, "Why Did Esau Spurn the Birthright?" 330–31.

[211]For example, Victor P. Hamilton comments on Gen. 25:34, "The narrative judges only Esau overtly. He spurned (*yibez* from *bāzâ*) his birthright." See Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 181; Similarly, Gordon J. Wenham comments, "The final comment of the narrator, "So Esau treated the rights of the firstborn with contempt," is important, because explicit moral commentary is rare in the Bible. It emphasizes, as has already emerged in the dialogue, that Esau has treated with flippancy something of great worth." See Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 178. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 182.

commentators do.[212] These translations contain the assumption that the narrator here "criticises" Esau's act of selling the birthright by saying וַיִּבֶז עֵשָׂו , *Thus Esau despised*. However, this translation needs to be reconsidered. First of all, the translation of בָּזָה as *to despise* could be a bit strong. It could be translated less severely as something like "to ignore" or "to think lightly of." In the Hebrew Bible, offence against God is generally expressed by the term בָּזָה[213] but its nuance need not always be strong. For example, according to Ps. 102:17 (MT 102:18), God is portrayed as one who does not בָּזָה , *ignore* (my translation), the prayer of the destitute.[214] Most English translations render בָּזָה as *to despise* or *to spurn*, but the translation such as "to ignore" or "to think lightly of" fits better in the context. This term need not be translated so strongly. In the same manner, the translation "and Esau *had thought lightly of* (or *ignored*) the birthright" seems to me more appropriate than "Thus Esau *despised* his birthright."

Secondly, the syntax of the waw consecutive in וַיִּבֶז needs to be reconsidered. The waw consecutive in וַיִּבֶז is, in its primary function, the temporal sequence of all the waw-consecutive verbs in Gen. 25:34. וַיִּבֶז may imply an explanatory comment "thus", but more direct and normal usage of the syntax in Gen. 25:34 is that Esau's action of selling the birthright is, according to the narrator, simply a sequel to his previous actions like eating,

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[212]Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 416 ["He thus disdained his right as firstborn."]; Speiser, *Genesis*, 194 ["Thus did Esau misprize his birthright."]; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 171 ["So Esau treated the rights of the firstborn with contempt."]; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1967), 152 ["So Esau despised his birthright."]; Sarna, *Genesis*, 182 ["Thus did Esau spurn the birthright."].

[213]See M. Görg, "בָּזָה" *TDOT* 2:62.

[214]Cf. Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 107. In relation to Ps. 102:17, Heard suggests to translate בָּזָה as "disregard" or "to ignore".

drinking, and going.[215] The narrator does not commend Esau for selling the birthright, but at the same time the narrator also does not criticise Esau's deed severely.

When one takes the translation "*Thus* Esau *despised* his birthright" for granted, it supports that the assumption that the" narrator here "evaluates" the deed of Esau's selling the birthright negatively. When one takes the translation "and Esau thought lightly of (or ignored) the birthright", however, this statement is a narration of the fact, not evaluation. From reading Gen. 25:34 itself, it is not clear whether the narrator has evaluated Esau negatively or not. Readers need not assume that the narrator is "despising" Esau's action of selling his birthright here.

4. Concluding Remarks

Genesis commentators and English translations have supported negative readings of the divine oracle concerning Esau (Gen. 25:23), Esau's outward appearance, and his selling the birthright to Jacob. In this chapter, however, I have discussed the possibility of viewing these elements more positively and favourably. The last part of the divine oracle has been understood as justifying Jacob's supremacy over Esau, but I have suggested that this oracle is like the law of the jungle, thus predicting whoever the lesser is, the lesser will serve the greater. I have also argued that the portrayal of Jacob is closer to the lesser in the narrative context. While Esau's reddish and hairy appearances and his role as a hunter have been negatively interpreted by Genesis commentators, I have also argued that these elements show the heroic and favourable nature of Esau's character, primarily by discussing intertexuality between Esau and other heroic characters in the Hebrew Bible.

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[215]R. Christopher Heard suggests this possibility. See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 107.

Finally, Esau's selling the birthright to Jacob is not a commendable action and his extreme hunger may not be enough excuse to justify his shameful action. However, as I have argued, most Genesis commentators have thought that only Esau despised the birthright. They have not equally criticised how Jacob has despised the birthright by treating it as something buyable and gaining it almost for nothing. It is also ironic that neither Esau nor Jacob receives any material benefits by having the right of the firstborn. Taken together, these observations support my contention that a more favourable reading of Esau is at least possible, and that there is self-perpetuating circular argument at work in the majority of translations and commentaries. A prior assumption of Esau's secondary status is used to disambiguate crucial passages in the Hebrew text and these partial readings are then used to justify further negative interpretations in other places in the text.

Chapter 3

Esau's Marriage (Gen. 26:34-35; Gen. 28:8-9)

Ancient Israel never produced a marriage manual for its citizenry.[216]

The purpose of this chapter is to review the biblical depiction of Esau's marriage and offer a favourable reading of it. As with Esau's selling his birthright to Jacob, most interpreters have regarded Esau's marriage as negative. Genesis commentators such as John Skinner, Victor P. Hamilton, and David W. Cotter have understood Esau's marriage to the two Hittite women and a daughter of Ishmael as a sign of his unsuitability to be an heir of Isaac or to be the one chosen by God.[217] In particular, scholars who have examined marriage patterns in the book of Genesis, such as Seth D. Kunin, Devora Steinmetz, and Naomi Steinberg,[218] have assigned a negative value to Esau's marriage, based on their theoretical models of marriage patterns in Genesis.

In this chapter, however, I will argue how contemporary scholarship has misunderstood and misjudged the significance of Esau's marriage. More

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[216]Victor P. Hamilton, "Marriage," *ABD* 4: 560.

[217]For example, John Skinner comments, "But the unedifying stories of Jacob's treachery, which were the essential link of connexion between them, are here omitted; and a new motive is introduced, viz., the inadmissibility of intermarriage with the inhabitants of Canaan. By transgressing this unwritten law, Esau forfeits his title to the 'blessing of Abraham,' which is thus transferred to Jacob." For further discussion, see Skinner, *Genesis*, 374; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 235; Cotter, *Genesis*, 199. This kind of comment on Esau's marriage is, of course, not limited to Genesis commentators. Bert Dicou comments, "Not only by selling his birthright to his brother but also by his marriages, Esau shows that he does not care to be the chosen one. The inheritor of God's promise cannot marry women from the people stilling living in the promised land, as Esau does." See Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist*, 122.

[218]See Seth D. Kunin, *The Logic of Incest: A Structuralist Analysis of Hebrew Mythology* (JSOTSup 185; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 115; Devora Steinmetz, *From Father to Son: Kinship, Conflict, and Continuity in Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 100–1; Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 96.

careful reading of Esau's marriage will show another interpretative option which is more plausible within the larger Esau-Jacob narrative. It is my contention that Esau's marriage itself has nothing much to do with his inappropriateness to be the chosen one. Neither does his marriage necessarily encourage readers to have a negative impression of Esau. Rather, the negative impression needs to be directed against Isaac who has not properly given instructions about an appropriate marriage partner to Esau. To argue this further, this chapter will consist of three sections. Section 1 is devoted to re-evaluating the real problem of Esau's marriage to the two Hittite women. Section 2 examines what Esau's marriage to the daughter of Ishmael means. In section 3, I will discuss the inconsistent ascription of names to Esau's wives and its possible impact on readers' construal of Esau.

1. What is the Real Problem of Esau's Marriage[219] to *Hittite* Wives?

> *and Esau became forty years old, and he married Judith, the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath, the daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they became bitterness of spirit for Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 26:34-35) (My Translation)*

When Esau became forty years old, he married two Hittite women, Judith and Basemath (Gen. 26:34-35). The narrator briefly mentions that they became מֹרַת רוּחַ , *bitterness of spirit*,[220] for Isaac and Rebekah. Many questions

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[219]The two accounts of Esau's marriage (Gen. 26:34-35; Gen. 28:6-9), in the narrative structure, mark the beginning and ending of the well-known episode of Jacob's stealing of Isaac's blessing for Esau (Genesis 27). Gen. 26:34-28:9 can be regarded as a coherent literary unit. This division is supported by the Jewish lectionary. See Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 202; cf. Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 100.

[220]The phrase "bitterness of spirit" is used only here in the Hebrew Bible. Gordon J. Wenham points out that this phrase is similar to "bitter in soul", which denotes "intense anguish such as Hannah and Job experienced" (1 Sam. 1:10; Job 7:11; 10:1). See Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 205.

come from this ambiguous statement. Does the narrator indirectly criticise Esau's marriage to the Hittite women here? Why do Esau's Hittite wives cause bitterness for Isaac and Rebekah? Is it that Isaac and Rebekah tend to dislike local people in Canaan including the Hittites? Or do they dislike Judith and Basemath personally regardless of where they are from? The narrator does not give any clear reason why Judith and Basemath made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah.

A majority of Genesis commentators, including Victor P. Hamilton, Gordon J. Wenham, and Claus Westermann, understand that Isaac and Rebekah's displeasure in Gen. 26:34-35 derived from Esau's exogamy.[221] They have understood the narrator's comment here as implying that Esau's way of selecting women to marry has disappointed Isaac and Rebekah. However, the real problem of Esau's marriage to Hittite women is *not simply how Esau marries* — either endogamously or exogamously.

The textual focus in Gen. 26:34-35 is in fact *the conflict within Isaac's family* between Isaac and Rebekah and their daughters-in-laws, Judith and Basemath. What has brought bitterness of life to Isaac and Rebekah is not the breaking of a cultural norm through Esau's exogamy with the Hittite women but Esau's marriage to Judith and Basemath at a personal level. A careful reading of Gen. 26:35 supports this argument. Gen. 26:35 reads: וַתִּהְיֶינָ מֹרַת רוּחַ לְיִצְחָק וּלְרִבְקָה, *and they became bitterness of spirit for Isaac and Rebekah.* The question here is who *they* are. When the narrator says "*they* became bitterness of spirit," does the pronoun *they* include Esau's two Hittite wives only or "both Esau and his two Hittite wives"? If the latter is the case,

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[221]For further discussion, see Alter, *Genesis*, 136; Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 254; Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 105–6; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 210; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 447; Kunin, *The Logic of Incest*, 115; Sarna, *Genesis*, 189; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 205. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 447.

the implication is that Esau can be blamed for disappointing his parents by marrying Hittite women at his discretion without any consent from his parents. However, the third person feminine plural subject in וַתִּהְיֶיןָ, *and they became*, suggests that it is primarily Judith and Basemath who have made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah. Esau may not avoid being responsible for taking them as wives, but Esau himself is not a primary cause of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah.

Why then do Esau's *Hittite* wives become bitterness of spirit for Isaac and Rebekah? One possible explanation is that Isaac and Rebekah might have a general dislike for the Hittites in the area where they lived. According to Gen. 26:12-22, Isaac has experienced frequent conflicts (e.g. the ownership of wells) with local people. It is possible that Isaac and Rebekah have come to dislike people who lived in the land of Canaan, including the Hittites. The Hittites in the Hebrew Bible can be identified as one of the peoples in Canaan.[222] They were living in Palestine before Abraham arrived in that land,[223] as can be inferred from references to them in the book of Genesis (Gen. 15:20; cf. Gen. 23:3, 5, 7, 10, 16, 18, 20).[224]

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[222]There are two different groups of the Hittites according to the biblical references. One is a local people in Palestine who settled near Hebron before Abraham arrived at Canaan (cf. Gen. 15:20; Genesis 23). The other group can be discerned as the Hittites of north Syria (the Neo-Hittites). According to Josh. 1:4, "the land of the Hittites" refers to the area around the Euphrates and the Hittites in this land are not identical to the Hittites in Hebron. See also Jud. 1:26; 1 Kgs. 10:29; 2 Chr. 1:17; 2 Kgs 7:6. For further discussion, Gregory McMahon, "Hittites in the OT," *ABD* 3: 231–3; A. Kempinski, "Hittites in the Bible: What Does Archaeology Say?" *BAR* 5 (1979): 21–45. John Van Seters suggests a possibility that the use of the terms "Hittite" and "Amorite" in the Old Testament is not historical but rhetorical. According to Van Seters, these terms could be used to mark non-Israelites by Israelite authors. See John Van Seters, "The Terms 'Amorite' and 'Hittite' in the Old Testament," *VT* 22 (1972): 80.

[223]When God promised Abraham to give a land to his descendants, Gen. 15:20 indicates that the Hittites were one of the people who have already settled in that land.

[224]The phrase "sons of Heth" occurs in Genesis 23 where Abraham purchases a field and cave to bury Sarah. Heth also appears in Gen. 10:15 as one of the sons of *Canaan*, the son of Ham (cf. 1 Chr. 1:13). The "daughters of Heth" are also mentioned by Rebekah twice in Gen. 27:46.

From the narrative context, however, Rebekah's words with regard to Judith and Basemath imply that her dislike of Judith and Basemath is not just derived from the fact that they are the Hittites. Rebekah shows more hostility toward Esau's Hittite wives than Isaac. In Gen. 27:46 Rebekah directly expresses her dislike for Judith and Basemath to Isaac: "I am weary of my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women *such as these* [emphasis mine; *like these*], one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?" (Gen. 27:46 RSV) Rebekah's own feeling expressed here strongly implies that she also *specifically* did not like Judith and Basemath, her daughters-in-law. She has a particular problem with Judith and Basemath. As R. Christopher Heard points out, Rebekah's objection to Jacob marrying women *like these* suggests that her *general* dislike for Hittite women could have been shaped by her dislike for Esau's two Hittite wives Judith and Basemath *specifically.*[225] The narrative implies more strongly that there is a particular problem — whatever it is — with Judith and Basemath. Therefore, it is misguided to regard Esau as being entirely responsible for the grief of his parents by marrying the Hittite women.

Who Will Readers Blame, If Necessary, Regarding Esau's Marriage?

Another intrinsic crux in Esau's marriage to the Hittite women is whether Esau knew how his marriage to Judith and Basemath would appear to his parents before he married. The narrator is not clear on this point, but Gen. 28:6-8 implies that Esau did not know that his Hittite wives had displeased his

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[225]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 108.

parents until Isaac sent Jacob to Paddan-aram with instructions to take a wife from Laban's daughters, not from Canaanite women (cf. Gen. 28:1-2).[226] The fact that Isaac sent Jacob with instructions not to take a wife from Canaanite women encouraged Esau to seek another wife for himself. His marriage to Mahalath, one of Ishmael's daughters, indicates that Esau has now come to recognise how his previous marriage to two Hittite women has displeased his father *Isaac*.[227] He thus seeks a wife who is close to his family. In view of this, it can be reasonably deduced that neither Isaac nor Rebekah ever warned Esau that they did not want him to marry a Hittite woman. Before Esau saw Isaac sending Jacob to Paddan-arm, the narrative strongly implies that Esau did not know his parents' preferences for suitable marriage partners. Is it then Esau's fault if he disregarded parental expectations over marriage that he did not know existed? Or is it Isaac or Rebekah's fault for not properly telling Esau of their specific wishes concerning his marriage partner?

Genesis commentators and scholars such as Jan P. Fokkelman, Gordon J. Wenham, and David W. Cotter question Esau's intelligence (or intention) and criticise Esau for his failure to recognise his parents' indirect expectation for his marriage partners.[228] For example, Wenham comments, "That it was only after he had heard Isaac sending Jacob off that he realised his wives were unpopular suggests Esau was rather *slow-witted*."[229] Similarly, Fokkelman

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[226]Gen. 28:1-2 reads: "Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and charged him, "You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women. Arise, go to Paddanaram, to the house of Bethuel your mother's father; and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother's brother." (RSV)

[227]In Gen. 28:8, the narrator excludes Rebekah as if Esau may be concerned about only his father's feeling in regard to the previous marriage, not his mother's. This also hints at conflict within Isaac's family caused by parental favouritism.

[228]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 214; Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 105; Cotter, *Genesis*, 199. With regard to Esau's marriage with two Hittite women, David W. Cotter even claims that Esau would have intentionally—and provocatively—married inappropriately. For further discussion, see also Waltke, *Genesis*, 383.

[229]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 214.

states that Esau "the lumpish fellow" has not noticed his parents' dismay.[230] Esau, of course, is partly responsible for his deed, but these commentators tend to put the blame entirely upon Esau. Their criticism of Esau appears to be based on their own culturally affected view of judging who is responsible when a family problem occurs between parents and their children.

Most Genesis commentators who are from European or North American cultural backgrounds take Esau's marriage to the Hittite wives entirely as Esau's fault and as a rationale for his dis-election. Would readers from non-European or non-North American background also regard Esau's choice of marriage entirely as Esau's fault as Wenham and Fokkelman do? I suggest that this problem can be seen from a different angle, for a marriage problem which occurred in a family can be judged differently according to various cultural or social norms. I will suggest a Korean-American immigrant context as such an example.

Reading Esau's Marriage to the Hittite Women in a Korean-American Immigrant Context

If readers, especially from the Korean immigrant or Korean-American community in the United States, pay close attention to the story of Esau's marriage to the Hittite women, this story can reveal their own struggle caused by inter-cultural or inter-racial marriage. At least from a Korean cultural point of view, if one should decide to blame either Esau or his parents in regard to Esau's exogamy or inter-racial marriage,[231] it can be regarded without much doubt as a fault of his *parents*, Isaac and Rebekah, who have not properly

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[230]Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 105.

[231]My intention here is not to play the "blame game". As most Genesis commentators from European or North American cultural backgrounds tend to understand Esau's intermarriage by blaming Esau only, I am suggesting a possibility to view Esau's marriage from a different perspective.

instructed Esau not to marry a foreign woman. A number of Korean-American parents who live in the U.S. are experiencing a similar problem of children's marriages which do not meet their parental preference. As Korea is one of the most homogeneous nations in the world,[232] it is generally very difficult for most Korean-American parents, who originally come from a mono-cultural and mono-lingual nation but live in the U.S., to accept that their children can marry people outside their own ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Korean-American parents who live in the U.S. as first-generation immigrants generally prefer their children to marry a Korean.[233] However, their children, who were neither born in Korea nor live in Korea, like Esau who was neither born nor lived in the homeland of his parents, often come to marry a person in America who is from a different ethnic and cultural background,[234] unless their parents have consistently urged them to marry a Korean. Just as Esau's intermarriage (or marriage outside the family circle)[235] displeased Isaac and Rebekah, a number of Korean-American children who do not live in their parents' homeland often displease their parents by marrying a person from a different ethnic and cultural background. However, in such a case, most people in a

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[232]Korean: 99.8% Other: 0.2 % (Chinese 100,000; Illegal migrant workers may be about 250,000) Quoted from Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: When We Pray God Works* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 386.

[233]According to the 5 % Public Use Micro-data Sample (PUMS) from the 1990 U.S. Census, only about 2 percent of foreign-born (i.e. Korean-born) Korean-Americans in the New York city area were intermarried. This data strongly implies that first-generation Korean immigrants in the U.S. tended to marry endogamously. Quoted from Zai Liang and Naomi Ito, "Intermarriage of Asian Americans in the New York City Region: Contemporary Patterns and Future Prospects," *International Migration Review* 33.4 (1999): 885. See Table 2.

[234]According to the 5 % Public Use Micro-data sample (PUMS) from the 1990 U.S. Census, about 65 percent of American-born Korean men who live in the New York city area were intermarried. In contrast, only about 2 percent of Foreign-born Korean men were intermarried. Quoted from Liang and Ito, "Intermarriage of Asian Americans in the New York City Region," 885. See Table 2.

[235]In Esau's case, the main issue may be not primarily about the ethnicity of marriage partners but about whether a marriage partner is within a family circle. However, the essence of the problem is still similar.

Korean immigrant community in the U.S. would generally regard it as the fault of the *parents* who have *failed* to give proper instruction to their children. European or North American readers such as Wenham and Fokkelman criticise Esau for his failure to recognise his parents' expectation. From a Korean cultural point of view, it cannot be simply regarded as a fault of children. I would rather criticise Isaac and Rebekah who have failed to give proper instruction to Esau.

In the early days of Korean immigrations in the U.S.,[236] inter-cultural or inter-racial marriage was unavoidable as Korean-Americans in the 1970's and 1980's had a limited choice of choosing a marriage partner within the circle of Korean immigrant community in the U.S. Some Korean-American parents thus used to send their children back to Korea for a while, as Isaac sends Jacob to Paddan-aram, in order to help them meet more Korean prospective marriage partners and choose a marriage partner among them.[237] If Esau's parents had taken proper steps when Esau became of age to marry, Esau could have had another option for a marriage by which Isaac and Rebekah may not have been displeased — either taking Leah or Rachel as a wife. Instead of Jacob taking both women as wives, Esau and Jacob each taking one of them could have been an ideal option for Isaac's family.

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[236]Since the Immigration Act of 1965 in the United States rapidly increased the numbers of Korean immigrants, I have referred to 1970's and 1980's as "the early days of Korean immigrations in the U.S". Cf. In-Jin Yoon, "The Social Origins of Korean Immigration to the United States from 1965 to the Present," Papers of the Program on Population 121 (1993): 1; Herbert R. Barringer and Sung-Nam Cho, *Koreans in the United States* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1989).

[237]According to Pyong Gap Min, this pattern of marriage is referred to as "internationally in-married". As Min points out, Korean immigrants in the U.S. often return for a while to marry Koreans and the newly married couple then return to the U.S. For further discussion, see Pyong Gap Min, "Korean Immigrants' Marital Patterns and Marital Adjustments," in *Family Ethnicity: Strength in Diversity* (ed. Harriette P. McAdoo; Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1993), 287–99.

If we view Esau's marriage from a different perspective than scholars such as Fokkelman and Wenham, Isaac cannot avoid the responsibility for his failure to arrange Esau's marriage. For those who live in European or North American culture, parentally arranged marriages often seem strange and absurd but marriages in the patriarchal world often operated in this fashion. While Abraham arranged for his son Isaac an acceptable marriage to a kinswoman (Genesis 24) when Isaac, like Esau, was *forty years old* (cf. Gen. 25:20), Isaac neglected to do the same for his own firstborn Esau when Esau became *forty years old.* Therefore, from my cultural point of view, the editorial comment in Gen. 26:34 "when Esau became *forty years old*" stands out and draws my attention less to Esau's failure to choose a suitable wife than to Isaac, who has not fulfilled his obligation to arrange an appropriate wife for his eldest son.[238]

Does Esau's Marriage Itself Disqualify Esau as the Next Progenitor?

As mentioned in the beginning of this presentation, scholars such as Kunin, Steinmetz and Steinberg who have investigated marriage patterns in Genesis have understood Esau's marriage to show the reason why Esau became dis-elected. For example, Steinmetz claims that Esau's choice of wives shows that he is not qualified to receive Isaac's blessing.[239] Kunin also insists that Esau marries *outside* and this gives a justification for Esau's rejection.[240] However, their judgment of Esau's marriage is based on a

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[238]Craig A. Smith suggests that the editorial comment "when Esau was forty years old" seems to draw the reader's attention less to Esau's failure to choose a suitable wife than to Isaac's neglect to provide an appropriate wife for his son. This suggestion accords well with a Korean cultural point of view. See Craig A. Smith, "Reinstating Isaac: The Centrality of Abraham's Son in the 'Jacob-Esau' Narrative of Genesis 27," *BTB* 31 (2001): 131

[239]Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 100.

[240]Kunin, *The Logic of Incest*, 115.

superficial reading of Esau as a character who is dis-elected. Regardless of Esau's marriage to the Hittite women, we need to note that Isaac intended to bless Esau from the first. No causal relationship exists between Esau's marriage to the Hittite women and his loss of blessing from Isaac. Kunin's logic of *marriage outside = rejected* is too simple to explain all the complicated and inscrutable dynamics of dis-election occurring in the book of Genesis. It is not always clear what criterion Kunin employs to decide who can be perceived as *outside* or *inside*. From a certain point of view, Jacob's wives Leah and Rachel can be regarded as *outside* as much as Esau's two Hittite wives, because after all they are not directly from the lineage of Abraham but from the lineage of Nahor,[241] Abraham's brother.

If we follow Steinmetz's and Kunin's claims, it would mean that Jacob's marriage, unlike Esau's marriage, shows his suitability as an heir of Isaac. Does Jacob's marriage become a model of what his descendants ought to follow? What did Jacob do? Obeying Isaac's command, he went to Paddan-aram and found wives within his family circle. Following the logic suggested by Kunin and Steinmetz, all the sons of Jacob should then seek a wife from Paddan-aram where Rebekah's family live, just as our eponymous hero Jacob did. However, once Jacob has left Paddan-aram and come back to Canaan, no one else seeks a wife from Paddan-aram. This is not an appropriate place to seek a wife anymore, although Rebekah's family (thus Rachel's and Leah's) presumably still lived there. If one were to bring a bride from Paddan-aram after Jacob had left it, such a wife would be considered an outsider or a foreigner.

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[241] Rachel and Leah are the granddaughters of Bethuel, and thus the great-granddaughters of Nahor, Abraham's brother. From a genealogical point of view, Mahalath, Esau's other wife, would be regarded as more *inside* than Leah and Rachel, because she is a daughter of Ishmael, and thus a granddaughter of Abraham.

Furthermore, if we read carefully how Jacob's sons marry in Genesis, they do not follow Jacob's pattern. For example, Simeon's son Shaul was born of a Canaanite woman (cf. Gen. 46:10).[242] Genesis 38 records that Judah married the daughter of Shua, a *Canaanite*. Just as Esau has married the Hittite women, Judah has also married a local woman and even made Tamar, his daughter-in-law conceive. However, regardless of what Judah has done, he is still an heir of Jacob. Both the Davidic monarchy and Jesus came from the tribe of Judah. Joseph, the favourite son of Jacob, married Asenath, the daughter of an *Egyptian* priest just as Abraham, his grandfather, took Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant. Jacob's most prominent sons, Judah and Joseph both married foreign women. These cases suggest that it is misguided to explain Esau's marriage to the Hittite women as disqualifying Esau either from being Isaac's heir or the chosen one.

While scholars tend to despise Esau's choice of marriage as showing his foolishness or inappropriateness as an heir of Isaac, we need to note that the narrator never despises Esau's choice of his marriage partners as our contemporary Genesis commentators or scholars do. The narrator does not make any positive or negative judgment regarding Esau's marriage to the Hittite women. The narrator simply reports Isaac's and Rebekah's reaction to Esau's marriage to the Hittite women. He does not necessarily urge readers to sympathise with Isaac's and Rebekah's attitude toward Judith and Basemath. The narrator also does not provide the reason why Judith and Basemath, the Hittite women, are not eligible as Esau's wives. Gen. 27:46 simply mentions Rebekah's dislike for these Hittite women. What has caused Rebekah and Isaac to dislike Esau's Hittite wives is vague. From the narrative context, it is

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[242]Gen. 46:10 reads: "The sons of Simeon: Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jachin, Zohar, and Shaul, the son of a Canaanitish woman." (RSV)

also questionable whether Isaac and Rebekah really had clear expectations for Esau's or Jacob's marriage partners from the outset. It is also possible that Esau's first marriage to the Hittite women may have been what prompted Isaac's and Rebekah's specific requirements for the marriage partner of Jacob, rather than these requirements being already in place before Esau chose his brides.

2. What Does Marrying the Daughter of Ishmael Mean?

> *Gen. 28:6-9 Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram, to take to himself a wife from there, [and that] when he [Isaac] blessed him [Jacob] he commanded him, saying, "You shall not take a wife from the daughters of Canaan," [and that]Jacob obeyed his father and his mother and he went to Paddan-aram. So Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan were evil in the eyes of his father Isaac; and Esau went to Ishmael, and married, besides the wives that he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebaioth. (My Translation)*

Besides Esau's marriage to the two Hittite women, Gen. 28:6-9 describes his further marriage to a daughter of Ishmael. The fact that Isaac sent Jacob with an instruction not to take a wife from Canaanite women has encouraged Esau to seek another wife. His marriage to Mahalath, one of Ishmael's daughters, indicates that Esau now comes to recognise how his previous marriage to the two Hittite women has displeased his father *Isaac*. Here the narrator excludes Rebekah, as if Esau may be concerned about only his father's feeling in regard to the previous marriage, not his mother's. Whatever the case, it is again obvious that Esau did not know that his Hittite wives displeased his parents until Isaac sends Jacob away to Paddan-aram.

After Esau has realised how his Hittite wives appeared to his father, Esau responds to this parental preference by marrying one of Ishmael's daughters. He thus seeks a wife who is close to his family. The narrator here implies Esau's good intentions, as scholars such as Dicou, Hamilton, and Westermann have commented.[243] For example, Westermann comments that Esau tries to remedy his parents' grief by marrying a relative and he undertakes a journey like Jacob to do so. Westermann explains that the Priestly Writer "succeeded in presenting Esau in a more friendly light."[244] By marrying a daughter of Ishmael, Esau now comes to marry endogamously.[245] However, several Genesis commentators and scholars still judge that, regardless of Esau's good intention, Esau has selected another *wrong* woman by marrying Mahalath.[246] For example, in regard to Esau's marriage to Mahalath, Steinmetz states that Esau's choice of a wife is wrong once again.[247] Steinmetz's understanding is that, while much of the Abraham narrative is focused on separating Isaac's family from Ishmael's, Esau now identifies himself with the line which is not chosen by marrying a daughter of Ishmael. Similarly, Naomi Steinberg in her *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*,[248] insists that only "a woman within the patrilineage of Terah is an appropriate potential

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[243]Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist*, 122; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 235; Vawter, *On Genesis*, 309–10; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 448.

[244]Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 448. According to Westermann, Gen. 28:6-9 is attributed to the Priestly Writer. However, Westermann does not explain the reason why he attributes this passage to the Priestly Writer.

[245]Cf. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 263; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 372; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 235; von Rad, *Genesis*, 282; Vawter, *On Genesis*, 309–10; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 448.

[246]See Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 101; Skinner, *Genesis*, 374; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 372; Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 11; Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 100; Waltke, *Genesis*, 383.

[247]Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 100.

[248]Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*.

spouse for a man in the Israelite line of inheritance."[249] Steinberg thus sees Esau as putting himself outside the vertical Israelite lineage because he marries Mahalath, the wrong woman who comes from the line of Ishmael, whose mother *Hagar* is not from within the patrilineage of Terah.[250] Furthermore, Steinberg states that marriage in the ancient Near East functions to establish inheritance of land, but "only patrilineal collateral marriage within the line of Terah establishes the right to claim the land of Israel."[251] However, Steinmetz's and Steinberg's judgment on Esau's marriage to Mahalath is based on a superficial reading of Ishmael and Esau simply as dis-elected ones. A more detailed reading of these characters will undermine many of their main contentions and show positive and favourable nature of Esau's marriage to Mahalath.

First of all, I insist that Steinberg's theory on marriage pattern and heirship in Genesis is untenable, because her theory can not apply to all patriarchs in Genesis. Steinberg criticises Esau's marriage to Mahalath on the grounds that Mahalath is from the line of Ishmael whose mother Hagar is not from within the patrilineage of Terah.[252] Steinberg seems to assume that Jacob's wives would meet this qualification, but from the narrative context there is no textual evidence that Jacob's concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah, come from the line of Isaac. Whether the mother of either Bilhah or Zilpah comes from the Terahite patrilineage is also not clear within the patriarchal narrative.[253] If Esau's marriage to Mahalath is inappropriate simply because of

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[249]Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 5.

[250]Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 11.

[251]Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 6.

[252]Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 11.

[253]There are no biblical references regarding the genealogical information of Bilhah and Zilpah. Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 122.

the fact that Esau has married a woman who is from *outside the Terahite lineage,* on such a logic Jacob's marriage to Bilhah and Zilpah, who do not seem to come from the Terahite lineage, is also inappropriate and therefore the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah should not be appropriate heirs of Jacob. If one applies Steinberg's theory strictly, Dan and Naphtali (the sons of Bilhah) along with Gad and Asher (the sons of Zilpah) cannot legitimately make claim the land of Canaan and be heirs of Jacob. As Manasseh and Ephraim are the sons of the Egyptian priest's daughter who is also not from the Terahite lineage, they should never make a claim on the land of Canaan either.

Steinberg assumes that what distinguished Jacob from Esau is the nature of their respective marriages from a genealogical point of view.[254] According to her, Rachel, Leah, and Rebekah are correct wives for a son of the Abrahamic lineage, because they belong to "the collateral patrilineage of Nahor."[255] Steinberg supposes that it is their lineage that makes Jacob's wives Rachel and Leah different from Esau's wife Mahalath,[256] but we need to note that the genealogical information about Rachel and Leah is in fact obscure. From the narrative itself, readers do not have any clue as to who the mother of Rachel and Leah was. Her name and family origin is not recorded in the book of Genesis, and we as readers have no reason to believe that the mother of Rachel and Leah comes from the Terahite patrilineage.[257] We also have no idea who the mother of Laban and Rebekah was. If Mahalath is not an appropriate wife for Esau for the reason that her mother is not from the patrilineage of Terah, Leah and Rebekah may also not be appropriate wives as their mother's genealogy is not clearly indicated in the book of Genesis. As I

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[254]Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 11.

[255]Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 11.

[256]Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 11.

[257]Cf. Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 125.

have discussed briefly, Steinberg's explanations of marriage patterns and heirship in Genesis are not firmly supported by textual evidence. Her theory on the legitimacy of marrying exclusively within the patrilineage of Terah cannot explain various marriage patterns of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis. It certainly does not become a model of marriage that patriarchs ought to follow.

Secondly, Devora Steinmetz has also underestimated the significance of Esau's marriage to Mahalath because she has understood the Abraham narrative as focusing on separating Isaac's family from Ishmael's.[258] Marrying Mahalath, a daughter of Ishmael, however, means more than Esau identifying himself with the line which is not chosen. If one observes marriage patterns in the book of Genesis from a genealogical point of view carefully, Esau's marriage to Mahalath can be regarded as even more appropriate than Jacob's marriage to Leah and Rachel. Contrary to Steinmetz' assumption, the Abraham narrative in fact does not always separate Ishmael's line from Isaac's. For example, when the narrator introduces the family background of Mahalath, the narrator still describes *Ishmael* as *Abraham's son* (Gen. 28:9) despite the fact that Ishmael has been expelled along with his mother Hagar by Sarah's request (cf. Gen. 21:8-21). For our narrator, Ishmael is *Abraham's son* even though he does not live with Abraham and has settled in the wilderness of Paran. Gen. 25:9, which describes *Abraham's sons*[259] Isaac and Ishmael burying their father Abraham together, strongly indicates that Ishmael has not been completely driven out from the house of Abraham. If Ishmael has been completely cast out, how can Ishmael come to the burial of Abraham? Ishmael must have remained in contact with Abraham and Isaac even after Sarah has

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[258]Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 100.

[259]The narrator describes Isaac and Ishmael as בָּנָיו , *his [Abraham's] sons.*

requested Abraham to cast him out.[260] Thus, Ishmael's line is more than just the line that is not chosen by God. They are still part of Abraham's family.

From a genealogical point of view, Esau's marriage to Mahalath makes Esau closer to the lineage of Abraham, who has first received God's promise and will become an ancestor of the *Hebrews* in the land of Canaan. As Gerda Hoekveld-Meijer points out, by taking Ishmael's daughter as a wife Esau comes to marry *within the context of the House of Abraham*, while Jacob's marriage still stands *within the much wider context of the lineage of Terah*.[261] Mahalath is a granddaughter of Abraham, while Rachel and Leah are the granddaughters of Bethuel, and thus the great-granddaughters of Nahor, Abraham's *brother*. By marrying Rachel and Leah, the daughters of the *Aramean*, Jacob himself in fact has distanced himself from the house of Abraham. Instead, Jacob's family lineage becomes closer to the lineage of Nahor, an *Aramean* whose descendants Bethuel and Laban have remained in Aram, not in the land of Canaan.

Within the patriarchal narrative, the narrator interestingly repeats and emphasises the fact that Rebekah and Laban are from an *Aramean* background (Gen. 25:20). Readers, however, are aware from the narrative context that, after God has called Abraham, he left the house of Terah (Gen. 12:4) and separated himself from his family of origin and also from *Aramean* gods. When Rachel fled with Jacob, she stole הַתְּרָפִים , *the household gods (teraphim)* of her father Laban (Gen. 31:19), which implies that Laban believed in different gods from Abraham's. The patriarchal narrative does not have any account of Abraham ever returning to Aram. Abraham does not even want Isaac his son ever to go to Haran (Gen. 24:5-8), the land where his father

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[260]According to Rabbinic tradition, Keturah is regarded as Hagar. See Genesis Rabbah 61:4. For further discussion, see Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 334.

[261]Hoekveld-Meijer, *Esau: Salvation in Disguise*, 53.

Terah lived. It is obvious that our narrator's interest in the patriarchal narrative is with Abraham, not with Terah who left Ur in order to enter the land of Canaan but ended up settling in Haran instead (Gen. 11:31). The narrator is more concerned with Abraham who obeyed God's command, left the house of *Terah*, and came to the land of Canaan. Therefore, genealogically, Jacob's marriage to two *Aramean* women within the much wider context of the lineage of Terah cannot be evaluated as *better* or *more appropriate* than Esau's marriage to Mahalath which is within the context of the house of Abraham. As the book of Deuteronomy describes Jacob as "a wandering Aramean" (Deut. 26:5), his marriage to Aramean wives has given Jacob an Aramean image in later tradition.

What I have argued in this section is not that Esau's marriage is better than Jacob's. Rather, my point is that Jacob's marriage need not be regarded as better than Esau's and that Esau's marriage should not be regarded as justification for his dis-election. Marriage itself never distinguishes Esau from Jacob in terms of his suitability as Isaac's heir. The Hebrew Bible does not provide any clearly stated how-to-marry manual for Israelite people, although cultural implications on ideal marriage are embedded in the Hebrew Bible. Gen. 2:24 may be regarded as an initial exhortation for ideal marriage: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh." (NASB) As this statement is placed near the beginning of the whole Bible, the statement written in Gen. 2:24 may be preeminent in understanding ideal marriage presented in the Hebrew Bible. However, how many marriages fit into this exhortation on monogamous marriage leaving one's parents?

Judging a biblical character primarily based on his (or her) marriage often could lead to misinterpretation of the biblical character. Esau's marriage

to a daughter of Ishmael is not a matter of evaluating right or wrong. The biblical text or the narrator does not judge whether Esau has married a *wrong* woman or not. It is contemporary Genesis commentators and scholars who misjudge Esau's marriage by regarding Mahalath as a "wrong" woman, while I think that what is wrong is not Mahalath but the contemporary interpreters' judgment. Endogamous marriage may be the norm in the patriarchal age, but it is an overstatement to assert that the Hebrew Bible uniformly prohibits intermarriages. Ezra and Nehemiah prohibit intermarriages (Ezra 9-10; Neh. 13:23-27) but intermarriages have been inevitable as part of Israelite customs. Especially when one lives in a land where foreigners live with Israelites, it has happened that biblical characters come to marry a foreigner (a foreigner from an Israelite point of view). For example, Judah married a Canaanite (Gen. 38:2), Joseph an Egyptian (Gen. 41:45),[262] Moses a Midianite and a Cushite (Exod 2:21, Num. 12:1), Samson a Philistine (Judges 14; 16:4-22), David a Calebite and Aramean (2 Sam. 3:3). Solomon is a king of intermarriage (1 Kgs 3:1; 11:1; 14:21).

After all, Jacob's family had not succeeded in avoiding intermarriage. The genealogy of Jacob in Gen. 46:8-27 introduces three people as children from intermarriage among 70 people[263] in Jacob's family: Shaul, Manasseh and Ephraim. This genealogy does not directly mention them, but Judah's sons (Er, Onan and Shelah) are also children from intermarriage as their mother is a Canaanite woman.[264] The corruption of Jacob's family by intermarriage does not stop here. As Zilpah and Bilhah's family origin is not clear, we cannot exclude the possibility that they are foreign wives. Based on their status as

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[262]The genealogy of Jacob in Gen. 46:8-27 also records Joseph's intermarriage to an Egyptian wife.

[263]According to Septuagint, the number of Jacob's whole family 75. See also Acts 7:14.

[264]Fung, *Victim and Victimizer*, 53.

שִׁפְחָה, *maids*, Yiu-Wing Fung suggests the possibility that Zilpah and Bihah might be foreigners like Hagar, an "Egyptian maid." If it is the case, it means that Jacob has 4 sons[265] and 19 grandchildren[266] from this intermarriage.[267] Even if this is not the case, the problem of intermarriage on the part of Judah and Joseph should not be overlooked. As both Judah and Joseph were Jacob's prominent sons and become the foundation of the southern and northern kingdoms in later times, intermarriage on the part of these two sons causes a serious problem of corrupting Israelite identity.[268] Therefore, before we criticise Esau's intermarriage and take it as justification for his dis-election, we need to consider carefully how so-called foreigners and intermarriages have become part of customs from the early family history of the patriarchs.

In view of intermarriage as part of unavoidable Israelite customs, it is reasonable to read Esau's marriage without severe criticism of it. Rather than discredit to him, Esau's marriage to a daughter of Ishmael can be regarded as showing him a favourable light. After all, how foreign is a daughter of Ishmael, the half brother of Isaac and son of Abraham? He has made himself closer to Abraham's lineage. Once Esau has learned how his marriage to the Hittite women caused his parental grief, he reacts to this realisation in a good way. Although rabbinic traditions have generally portrayed Esau very negatively, even some of these traditions have seen this marriage more sympathetically. The midrash cited by Rashi records that Esau's sins were forgiven when he married Ishmael's daughter Mahalath (see Midrash Samuel 17:1; cf. Genesis Rabbah 67:13).[269]

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[265]Gad, Asher from Zilpah; Dan and Naphtali from Bilhah.

[266]14 grandchildren from Zilpah; 5 grandchildren from Bilhah. See Gen. 46:18, 25.

[267]Fung, *Victim and Victimizer*, 53.

[268]For further discussion, see Fung, *Victim and Victimizer*, 53–4.

[269]Quoted from Jed H. Abraham, "Esau's Wives," *JBQ* 25 (1997): 258.

3. Crux on the Names of Esau's Wives

Gen. 26:34-35 And when Esau was forty years old he married ***Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite,*** *and* ***Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite;***[270] *and they brought grief to Isaac and Rebekah. (NASB)*

Gen. 28:8-9 So Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan displeased his father Isaac; and Esau went to Ishmael, and married, besides the wives that he had, ***Mahalath***[271] ***the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebaioth.*** *(NASB)*

Gen. 36:2-3 Esau took his wives from the daughters of Canaan: ***Adah the daughter of Elon the Hittite,*** *and* ***Oholibamah the daughter of Anah and the granddaughter of Zibeon the Hivite;*** *also* ***Basemath,***[272] ***Ishmael's daughter, the sister of Nebaioth.*** *(NASB)*[273]

Previously in this chapter, I have discussed Esau's marriages to Judith and Basemath, the two Hittite women, and to Mahalath, Ishmael's daughter. I have interpreted Esau's marriage in a favourable light, criticising scholars who have read Esau's marriage negatively based on their theoretic model of marriage patterns in Genesis. However, one of the challenges in understanding Esau's marriages in a favourable light is that it is simply not clear whom Esau

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[270]Hivite, according to LXX, SP, and Syriac.

[271]Basemath, according to Syriac.

[272]Mahalath, according to Samaritan Pentateuch.

[273]The Hebrew text does not clearly differentiate the daughter of Ishmael as if she is also a daughter of Canaan. However, Ishmaelites generically do not belong to Canaanites. Tribes such as the Hittites, Amorites, Jebusites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Girgashites are regarded as Canaanites (cf. Deut. 7:1). English translations such as NIV, NASB, and TNK differentiate the daughter of Ishmael as if she is not a Canaanite.

actually married. As the above references illustrate, readers encounter inconsistent records of the names of Esau's wives. Unlike contemporary skillful biblical scholars, first-time ordinary readers of Genesis, who give their primary attention to Jacob in the Esau-Jacob story, may not even recognise that the names of Esau's wives in Gen. 36:2-3 are different from those in earlier references (Gen. 26:34-35; Gen. 28:9).

Up to the point of reading Genesis 36, all first-time readers have no reason to question the accuracy of the names of Esau's wives, but reading Gen. 36:2-3 then generates difficulty in figuring out who Esau's wives actually were. Before Genesis 36, the narrator has given the names of Esau's three wives as: (1) *Judith*, daughter of Beeri the Hittite (Gen. 26:34); (2) *Basemath*, the daughter of Elon the Hittite (Gen. 26:34); (3) *Mahalath*, the daughter of Ishmael, sister of Nebaioth (Gen. 28:9). Obviously, the names of Esau's wives in Genesis 36, *Adah/Oholibamah/Basemath*, do not match to the names *Judith/Basemath/Mahalath* in earlier references. Only the name Basemath appears in the two different sets of lists, but her family background is not identical in both lists. Basemath in Gen. 36:3 is identified as *the daughter of Ishmael*, while Basemath in Gen. 26:34 is introduced as *the daughter of Elon* the Hittite. According to Gen. 28:9, Ishmael's daughter is Mahalath, not Basemath. Likewise, Adah in Gen. 36:2 is introduced as *the daughter of Elon the Hittite*, but in Gen. 26:34 Basemath, not Adah, is introduced as Elon's daughter. Oholibamah in Gen. 36:2 is *the daughter of Anah and the granddaughter of Zibeon the Hivite*, but either Oholibamah or the name of her fathers is not mentioned in earlier references (Gen. 26:34-35; Gen. 28:8-9).

Is It Possible to Provide Any Literary Solution to These Name Variations of Esau's Wives?

Puzzled by these inconsistencies in the names of Esau's wives, scholars have offered various explanations regarding the two different sets of names for Esau's wives in Genesis. From a source-critical perspective, the discrepancy in the names of Esau's wives can be attributed to the combination of different documentary sources or traditions, which preserve a different version of Esau's marriages. For instance, regarding this discrepancy, Gordon J. Wenham comments that Genesis 36 and Gen. 26:34; 28:9 represent different traditions of Esau's marriages, but Wenham admits that it is not clear how the different traditions are to be related.[274]

On the other hand, scholars who are interested in biblical genealogy do not simply agree to this source critical perspective. For example, R. R. Wilson, in *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*,[275] states that "we need not assign the contradictory genealogies to different literary sources or even to different oral traditions."[276] Instead, Wilson proposes that Gen. 36:1-5 is a later editorial attempt to harmonise the data of 36:9-43 with the data of 26:34 and 28:9.[277] However, as there still exists a difference between these two accounts, Wilson's argument is not convincing. If a later editor attempted to harmonise, why is still there difference? After all, they are not harmonised at all.

Although the inconsistency in the names of Esau's wives is obvious, there have been other scholars who have attempted to harmonise the name

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[274]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 335.

[275]Robert R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

[276]Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 180–1.

[277]Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 174–6.

variations from a synchronic literary perspective. Possible solutions to the different names of Esau's wives are mostly some form of attempted harmonisation between these different names. For example, one may assume that Adah in Gen. 36:2 and Basemath in Gen. 26:34 may be the same person from the fact that their father is designated as *Elon the Hittite*. In the same way, Basemath in Gen. 36:3 and Mahalath in Gen. 28:9 may be the same person, for in both cases their father is designated as Ishmael.[278] Following such logic, however, one cannot suppose that Judith and Oholibamah might be the same person, for the names of their fathers are different (Judith's father is Beeri; Oholibamah's father is Anah).[279] One would assume that their fathers might have two names or have changed his name as Abraham, Sarah, and Jacob do, but there is no evidence for this in the textual tradition.

A different kinds of harmonisation could be also attempted. As the order of Esau's wives' ethnic designation in both lists is the same (if the Samaritan Pentateuch's, Septuagint's, and Syriac's reading of "Hivite" is preferred in Gen. 26:34),[280] the two sets of names for Esau's wives (Gen. 26:34-35; Gen. 28:8-9 / Gen. 36:2-3) then can be diagrammed as follows:
1) Judith (Hittite) - Basemath (Hivite)[281] *- Mahalath (the daughter of Ishmael)*
2) Adah (Hittite) - Oholibamah (Hivite) - Basemath (the daughter of Ishmael)
If we use this common structure to argue that there is only one list of wives, we need to suppose that both Esau's wives and their fathers had two names at a time or changed their names. Unless our Genesis narrator's concern is solely

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[278]Harold G. Stigers, *A Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 216; Cf. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 392.

[279]cf. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 392.

[280]Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 392.

[281]If SP's, LXX's, and Syriac's reading of "Hivite" is preferred in Gen. 26:34.

on the *ethnicity* of Esau's wives instead of the *names* of Canaanite or Ishmaelite women, this harmonisation is also unlikely.

Traditional Jewish commentators are also good harmonisers. According to Jed H. Abraham's analysis, traditional Jewish commentators, who believe that the book of Genesis is written under the divine inspiration by Moses, resort to several strategies in order to explain the different names of Esau's wives: (1) Esau's wives were renamed; (2) they had more than one name at a time; (3) Esau had more than three wives.[282] Jed H. Abraham, in his article *Esau's Wives*, analyses representative examples of traditional Jewish literary solutions such as those of Rashi,[283] Ibn Ezra,[284] Rashbam,[285] and Ramban.[286] In criticising these interpretations as conjectural and not based on the plain sense of the biblical text, he proposes a very creative and plausible literary solution. In the scholarly discussion on the name change of Esau's wives, I think that Jed H. Abraham[287] offers one of the most logically developed suggestions, which is also favourable to Esau's marriage. Jed H. Abraham argues that Esau took his cousin, the daughter of his uncle Ishmael as a wife, but since her name happened to be identical to the name of his second wife Basemath, Esau changed her name to Mahalath, which is derived

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[282]Jed H. Abraham, "Esau's Wives," 251. Gordon J. Wenham, who assumes different traditions on Esau's marriages, also comments that Esau might have more than three wives, or his wives' names are changed. See Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 336.

[283]Rashi to Gen. 36:2-3. Rashi argues that Esau's wives gained new names. For example, Rashi takes *Adah daughter of Elon the Hittite* as the original name of *Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite.* For further discussion, see Jed H. Abraham, "Esau's Wives," 252.

[284]Ibn Ezra to Gen. 26:34; 28; 36:1. For further discussion, see Jed H. Abraham, "Esau's Wives," 252–3.

[285]Rashbam to Genesis 36:2. For further discussion, see Jed H. Abraham, "Esau's Wives," 252–3.

[286]Ramban to Genesis 36:3. For further discussion, see Jed H. Abraham, "Esau's Wives," 253–4.

[287]As this author's last name is identical to "Abraham" in the patriarchal narrative, I will use his full name in the subsequent references to him to avoid any confusion that may be caused by mentioning his last name only.

from the verb *halah* [piel: *hillah*], "to make [the face of someone] sweet or pleasant," and "to induce to show favour in place of wrath and chastisement."[288] According to Jed H. Abraham's renaming theory, Esau hoped that his third marriage marked a new beginning for him and that his choices of wives would be forgiven. For this reason, Esau changes the names of his other two wives from Judith and Basemath to Oholibamah and Adah.[289] He points out that Oholibamah may be rendered "my tent [*oholi*] is a shrine [*bamah*= high place, altar, shrine],"[290] and that Adah was the name of Lamech's first wife who gave birth to Jabal, *the ancestor of those who dwell in tents* (Gen. 4:19-20). According to Jed H. Abraham's harmonisation, Esau renames his first two wives in order to associate them with the theme of "tents," thus showing his intention of joining his brother Jacob as a dweller of tents. Jed H. Abraham also suggests that the renaming of Esau's wives also serves to neutralise Esau's wives' negative pedigrees and obviates the need to send them away.[291]

Jed H. Abraham's literary solution to the name variation of Esau's wives[292] is more coherent than any other literary solution, but we, as readers of Genesis, still cannot know for sure that those conjectural events regarding Esau's renaming his wives would actually happen as Jed H. Abraham has suggested. His argument still has its weakness in its reliance on conjectural events, as in traditional Jewish literary solutions, that do not emerge from the plain sense of the biblical text. Nevertheless, Jed H. Abraham's argument of

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[288]Jed H. Abraham, "Esau's Wives," 255. See also note 13 of his work.

[289]Jed H. Abraham, "Esau's Wives," 255–6.

[290]However, in Ezek. 23, *oholi* is associated with the two sisters Oholah and Oholibah who are portrayed negatively as playing the harlot.

[291]Jed H. Abraham, "Esau's Wives," 256. n. 17. cf. Rashi to Genesis 28:9.

[292]See also Jed H. Abraham, "A Literary Solution to the Name Variations of Esau's Wives," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 7 (1997): 1–14.

relating the names of Esau's wives in Genesis 36 to the theme of tents along with Esau's good intention contributes to the possibility of viewing Esau in a favourable light.

Up to this point, I have discussed scholarly works which have attempted harmonisation of the different names of Esau's wives. Although scholars have been endeavouring to harmonise this discrepancy, none has provided satisfactory evidence for its literary solution. Even if a biblical scholar could provide an infallible answer to this problem, it is still questionable how many ordinary readers, in the process of their reading the Esau-Jacob story, will attempt to harmonise this discrepancy just as a biblical scholar has solved this problem. Biblical scholars may care about the different names of Esau's wives. However, will all readers really care about the names of Esau's wives? They may care only about the ethnicity of Esau's wives. It seems to me that the discrepancy itself will not necessarily require a literary solution from readers.

As various textual traditions such as the Samaritan Pentateuch attempt to harmonise two different sets of texts concerning the names of Esau's wives,[293] harmonisation is one of the easiest attempts to solve the discrepancy. However, all the efforts to harmonise this discrepancy may end up only providing various creative interpretations which go beyond the plain sense of the story. For the purpose of understanding the characterisation of Esau, a more important question will be how this discrepancy in the names of Esau's wives will affect readers' understanding of Esau. Now, we turn our attention to the readers' possible reaction to this discrepancy.

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[293]The Samaritan Pentateuch, in Gen. 36:3, 4, 10, 13, 17, uses the name Mahalath instead of the MT's Basemath to harmonise with Gen. 28:9. The Syriac version of Gen. 28:9 has Basemath instead of Mahalath.

How Will Readers React to the Different Names of Esau's Wives?

We have two different sets of names of Esau's wives (Gen. 26:34-35; Gen. 28:9 / Gen. 36:2-3) in Genesis. When readers find the discrepancy in these lists, how will readers react to these different names? As I have previously discussed, some readers may not even recognise it. Others who have observed this discrepancy may attempt to harmonise it. Instead of attempting harmonisation, there will be also readers who are confused about these accounts and are inclined to regard one account as more credible or believable than the other. For this group of readers, does the Esau-Jacob narrative provide any textual clue that can make readers evaluate the reliability of the two lists of Esau's wives' names? To what extent does this discrepancy drive readers to choose one of the accounts and believe it?

If readers choose one list of Esau's wives' names as trustworthy, one of the major elements in decision-making would be their preference of genre. Obviously, Genesis 36 is different from Genesis 25-35 in its form of discourse. While a large part of Genesis 25-35 consists of storytelling, Genesis 36 records genealogies of Esau's descendants. On the one hand, some readers, who regard genealogies as secondary apart from the main storytelling in Genesis, may consider the names of Esau's wives mentioned in Genesis 25-35 accurate, because it is unlikely for the narrator to make a mistake in getting their names right given that he (or she) alone is responsible for telling the whole story about Esau.

On the other hand, other readers who believe that genealogies are primary in Genesis may consider the name list of Genesis 36 accurate, because the genealogy in Genesis 36 is specifically about all the names of Esau's descendants. As the names of Esau's wives are repeated (cf. Gen. 36: 2-5, 10, 14, 16-18, 25), it is also unlikely for the compiler to make a mistake in getting the names of Esau's wives right.

Besides the above positions, there could be readers who think that the two different accounts of the names of Esau's wives may not be a matter of trusting either list of Esau's wives' names but of trusting our narrator. R. Christopher Heard questions the reliability of the Genesis narrator:

> The narrator clearly reports divergent traditions about the names and extended families of Esau's three wives. The fact that the narrator fails to harmonize the list in chapter 36 with those in chapters 26 and 28 suggests that the narrator simply did not care about getting the names of Esau's wives right. As Edomite (by marriage) women, were they simply not worth the time and effort it would take to correlate the two accounts? Moreover, can this narrator — who cannot get the facts straight about a matter so simple as the names of Esau's wives, the names of their fathers, and their ethnicities — be trusted to get other, more momentous facts straight? At this late point in the story, the narrator's inability to control readers' responses to smaller, more localized ambiguities seems to be mutating into a more generalized ambiguity about the narrator's own reliability.[294]

While I agree with Heard's claim that the narrator does not care about getting the names of Esau's wives right, I do not think that the fact that the narrator does not get the names of Esau's wives right shows the unreliability of this narrator. Unrelenting perfectionists may think that the narrator should narrate all the details inerrantly, but I do not think that the narrator's main concern in storytelling is getting all the details perfect. When contemporary readers read novels or watch movies, it is almost impossible to find such a work that has made all the details of contents inerrant and perfect. Even if we report a minor mistake in published novels or movies played, it is very questionable that a writer of that work is willing to revise that part unless it severely affects the

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[294]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 135.

whole storytelling. This could be regarded as idle imagination, but suppose we could report this problem of Esau's wives' lists and request the Genesis author to consider rewriting the passages. What would the author do? I think that the author would reject this kind of request as I suppose that getting all the details perfect may not be the author's main concern. Before we attempt to harmonise the different accounts of the names of Esau's wives, we need to think of this question first, "What difference would it make if we have the correct name list of Esau's wives?" Readers, of course, will not need to question any more who Esau actually married, but does it really make any difference in readers' understanding of Esau or Esau's wives?

Just as no one has provided any satisfactory and plausible literary solution to the different names of Esau's wives, I am also not able to provide a firm answer to this discrepancy. At the least, it is obvious that for our narrator it is not important to get the names of Esau's wives right. If it does not matter to the narrator, why should it matter to us? The narrator seems to me to be more concerned with the general background of Esau's wives, not their individual names. For our narrator, the fact that Esau's first two wives are not from within the circle of Isaac's family seems more important. Likewise, the narrator's concern may be the fact that Esau has married the daughter of Ishmael, not the exact name of Ishmael's daughter. The two different sets of Esau's wives' names do not challenge the fact that Esau has married the daughter of Ishmael. As it is often customary to attach ethnic or family background to the name of a person in the Hebrew Bible, it is plausible that the narrator is usually interested in ethnic or family backgrounds of the character. The narrator seems to have two different traditions about the names of Esau's wives, but the fact that the narrator does not harmonise it, I think, shows that the narrator respects different traditions and it was not the

narrator's main concern to harmonise them. Therefore, the different names of Esau's wives provide no reason for readers to read Esau's marriage negatively.

4. Concluding Remarks

For many Genesis commentators and scholars, the problems raised by Esau's marriage tell a story as to why Esau is not worthy of being chosen by God or becoming Isaac's heir. While the Genesis text is not eager to make any value judgment on Esau's marriage, scholars from European or North American backgrounds[295] explain that Esau's marriage is not appropriate, as if Jacob's marriage is obviously better than Esau's, or Esau himself is entirely responsible for his choice of marriage. Whose fault is it anyway?[296] Is it Esau's fault? Or is it Isaac or Rebekah's fault? I have argued that from a Korean perspective Isaac can be regarded as more responsible than Esau for the failure to find a suitable marriage partner. More careful reading of Esau's choice of partners in itself never distinguishes Esau from Jacob in terms of his suitability for election. It is misleading to regard Esau's marriage as disqualifying Esau from being Isaac's heir or the chosen one. His marriage, particularly with a daughter of Ishmael, may even prompt readers to have a more favourable impression of Esau. Finally, although the naming of Esau's wives is incoherent, this does not necessarily prevent us from reading Esau's marriage favourably.

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[295]For example, see Kunin, *The Logic of Incest*, 115; Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 100; Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 11.

[296]Here I am rewording a title used by Philip Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* (JSOTSup 204; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

Chapter 4
For Whom the Blessing Exists (Genesis 27)

> *At this point in the story [Gen. 27:1-4] it is unclear whether Esau's procuring of the paternal blessing would result in nullifying the effects of his having already relinquished his birthright. At the very least, one would think that getting his father's blessing, which presumably belongs to the firstborn no less than the birthright itself, might even the score a little. If one brother claims a birthright and the other claims a patriarchal blessing, then perhaps mediation would be required, thus giving Esau a sporting chance. But alas, when the dramatic episode comes to a close, Esau has lost both birthright and blessing. He's a two-time loser.*[297]

Frank Anthony Spina makes the above statement in the chapter entitled "Esau: The Face of God" in his *The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story*. As Spina points out, if Esau had received Isaac's initial blessing, the story of Esau and Jacob might have turned into a very interesting situation, but Esau unfortunately did not get that blessing. Genesis 27 describes a scene where Esau fails to receive the initial blessing intended by Isaac because of Rebekah's and Jacob's interruption. The rights or benefits inherent in Esau's family status are seemingly taken from Esau and conferred upon Jacob. Esau, who once sold his birthright to Jacob, now comes to lose his blessing too.

At many points, the Esau-Jacob story presents a mysterious choice by God. From a cultural perspective, Esau is certainly entitled to receive Isaac's blessing as a firstborn.[298] Jacob, however, gained the right of the firstborn by

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[297]Spina, "Esau: The Face of God," 18.

[298]Cf. Exod. 13:2; Deut. 15:19. Biblical references show that the first-born son was regarded as sacred and the exclusive possession of God. Cf. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 184–5.

giving some lentil stew to Esau,[299] and he also comes to receive Isaac's blessing intended for Esau with the help of Rebekah's trick. The narrator, however, does not criticise the acts of either Jacob or Rebekah. Does the narrator then show the sympathy with Jacob rather than Esau? I think not. In fact, the narrator never explicitly states that Jacob is more commendable than Esau. Interestingly, the Genesis narrator can rather be interpreted as showing a positive fascination with Esau in this blessing scene.[300] If the narrator is not sympathetic to Esau, the pathos of the scene between Isaac and Esau after Jacob's deceit would be narrated very shortly.[301] If Esau is not worthy of readers' attention, Esau would have simply disappeared in the narrative right after Jacob stole his blessing from Isaac. However, our narrator shows his sympathy with Esau in this particular instance.

The present chapter scrutinises various aspects of the blessings given to Esau and Jacob and interprets them in the narrative context. As Esau fails to receive Isaac's blessing intended for him, some readers may think that Esau becomes the forsaken and he is not blessed like Jacob. Esau is given a blessing in Gen. 27:39-40, but the majority of Genesis commentators have understood

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[299]Walter Brueggemann even comments, "Like its main character, this narrative is indiscreet and at times scandalous. It shows God and his chosen younger one aligned against the older brother, against the father, and against the cultural presumptions of natural privilege." See Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 217.

[300]Walter Brueggemann points out that the narrator is like Isaac particularly in Gen. 27:37-38, because the narrator, like Isaac, cannot easily let go of *Esau.* See Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 210.

[301]The Hebrew narrator typically narrates this way when he is not interested in certain aspects of the story. For example, the narrator in 2 Kgs 14: 18 simply summarises the rest of the deeds of Amaziah as follows: "Now the rest of the deeds of Amaziah, are they not written in the book of the Chronicles of the King of Judah?" Cf. 1 Kgs. 14:19; 1 Kgs. 22:39; 2 Chr. 26:22; 2 Chr. 32:32.

this as a curse, an anti-blessing or at best as a secondary blessing.[302] For this reason, Esau has been regarded as a character who has no significant role to play.[303] However, a close reading of the blessings given to Esau and Jacob in the narrative context enables readers to view the blessing given to Esau more positively and favourably, which puts Esau in a more favourable light. Esau can be viewed as more than just a forsaken firstborn. At the same time, readers may also find that various blessings given to Jacob are in fact not so special. Jacob in this light is not simply the blessed one. To explain this further, this chapter will discuss the nature of the blessing given to Esau first and then compare this blessing with several blessings given to Jacob in the narrative context.

1. The Nature of Isaac's Blessing for Esau: Blessing or Curse?

> *Gen. 27:39-40 and Isaac his father answered and he said to him [Esau], "Behold, from the fertility of the earth shall your dwelling be, and from the dew of the heavens above; and by your sword you shall live and you shall serve your brother but as you wander you shall break his yoke from your neck.*
> *(My Translation)*

The nature of blessings in the book of Genesis is often ambiguous and double-faced: reflecting both bright and seamy sides of one's life. For

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[302]Cotter, *Genesis*, 204; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 306; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 228; von Rad, *Genesis*, 279; Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 480; Skinner, *Genesis*, 373; Spina, "Esau: The Face of God," 20; Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 125; Waltke, *Genesis*, 381.

[303]Roger Syrén, in his monograph *The Forsaken First-Born: A Study of a Recurrent Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives*, has examined the phenomenon of the "forsaken first-born" in the book of Genesis. While chapter three of his book is devoted to explaining the forsaken motif in Esau texts, Syrén has underestimated Esau as the one who has no theological role to play. See Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born*, 69.

instance, Jacob's blessings for Reuben, Simeon, and Levi are seemingly close to a curse.[304] In the story of the patriarchs, receiving a blessing in itself does not always convey good news for the one who is blessed. In the Esau-Jacob narrative, blessing is one of the major but complex themes which is developed further from the Abraham narrative. While that narrative does not go beyond simply mentioning the promise of blessing (cf. Gen. 12:2-3; 17:16, 20; 22:17, etc.), the Esau-Jacob narrative offers considerable reflection on the real bestowing of blessings for Esau and Jacob, Abraham's descendants. In order to understand Esau's narrative role, a proper interpretation of what Isaac said to Esau in his blessing is necessary.

When Esau heard that his father had already blessed Jacob, he asks Isaac to bless him too (Gen. 27:34). Isaac's blessing for Esau[305] in Gen. 27:39-40 is full of enigmatic statements which most scholars have interpreted negatively and unfavourably. However, as I will argue in this chapter, their interpretations are not derived from what the text reveals about Esau but from their own presupposition of Esau as a negative type. Reading ambiguous statements in Isaac's blessing for Esau could lead to either a positive or

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[304]Jacob says to Reuben, "Reuben, you are my first-born, my might, and the first fruits of my strengths, pre-eminent in pride and pre-eminent in power. Unstable as water, you shall not have pre-eminence because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled it—you went up to my couch!" (Gen. 49:3-4). Simeon and Levi receive the same blessing from his father: "Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. O my soul, come not into their council; O my spirit, be not joined to their company; for in their anger they slay men, and in their wantonness they hamstring oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel." (Gen. 49:5-7)

[305]Many Genesis commentators call it a curse or anti-blessing, but I will refer to it as "Isaac's blessing for Esau" in the present study.

[306]As the narrator does not use the term בָּרַךְ to describe Isaac's blessing for Esau, one may suppose that what Isaac said to Esau is not a blessing while Jacob has received a blessing. However, the scene of Jacob's blessings for his twelve sons later on (cf. Genesis 49) shows that the narrator also does not always use the term בָּרַךְ from the beginning to describe each blessing given to Jacob's twelve sons. The utterances of Jacob are clearly blessings for each son of Jacob as the narrator comments in the later part of describing this blessing scene (cf. Gen. 49:28). The fact that the narrator did not use the term בָּרַךְ does not necessarily mean that what Isaac says to Esau is not a blessing.

negative construal of Esau, but scholars have not properly discussed the positive and favourable options. Their neglect of Esau leads to closing their eyes to Esau's virtues and underestimating what Isaac's blessing really predicts about Esau's future. Now, let us turn our attention to how Genesis commentators and scholars have tended to read Isaac's blessing for Esau negatively and unfavourably, overlooking alternative positive interpretative options.

Privative or Partitive?

The translation of a single term מִן in Gen. 27:39-40 can lead to two totally opposite interpretations of Isaac's blessing for Esau. Many Genesis commentators and scholars, such as Hermann Gunkel and Victor P. Hamilton who understand Gen. 27:39-40 as anti-blessing or curse, take מִן in Gen. 27:39 as privative:[307] "*away from* the fertility of the earth shall your dwelling be, and *away from* the dew of heaven above." If one takes מִן as privative, Esau's dwelling can be understood as far from the fertile land. On the other hand, several Genesis commentators, such as Nahum M. Sarna, S. R. Driver and Robert Alter, regard מִן in Gen. 27:39 as partitive:[308] "*from* the fertility of the earth shall your dwelling be, and *from* the dew of heaven above." If one takes מִן as partitive, it implies that Esau's dwelling place would be a fertile land.

Most English translations (e.g. NIV, NAB, NASB, RSV, NJB, NRSV, KJV, etc.) take מִן used in Isaac's blessing for Esau in Gen. 27:39 as privative: *away from* or *far from*. However, ironically the same term מִן in Isaac's

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[307]See Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist*, 119; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 225, 228; Kidner, *Genesis*, 156–7; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 306; Scullion, *Genesis*, 204–5; Speiser, *Genesis*, 210; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 212; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 433; Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 125–6.

[308]Alter, *Genesis*, 143; Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 247; Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*, 106; Sarna, *Genesis*, 194.

blessing for Jacob in Gen. 27:28 is translated as partitive in these translations: "May God give you *of (from)* the dew of the heaven, *of (from)* the fertility of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine." This discrepancy of translating the same term מִן in Gen. 27:39 as privative is not limited to English translations. For instance, it also exists in representative Korean Bible translations. While the HRV translation (Hankul and Revised Version) takes מִן in Gen. 27:39 as partitive, RNKSV (Revised New Korean Standard Version) takes מִן as privative.

Why, then, is there a discrepancy in these English and Korean translations of the same term מִן in Isaac's blessing for Jacob (Gen. 27:28) and his blessing for Esau (Gen. 27:39)? Does this point to negative scholarly assumptions about Esau? The syntax of the term מִן wholly depends on the context, but scholarly assumptions about Esau as a negative type (or about the Edomite region as a desolate land) have led to reading מִן as privative: *away from* or *far from*.[309] However, the same term מִן , which is translated as partitive in Isaac's blessing for Jacob, can be legitimately translated as partitive in Isaac's blessing for Esau: "from the fertility of the earth shall your dwelling be, and from the dew of heaven above." (Gen. 27:39)

According to this alternative and positive translation option, Isaac predicts that, like Jacob, Esau will also enjoy some fertility of the earth and the dew of heaven. Grammatically, there is no reason to abandon this option. Compared to taking מִן as privative, it is equally plausible unless readers accept most translators' and Genesis commentators' bias against Esau. Translations such as the New King James Version and the Jewish Publication Society[310]

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[309]See Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist*, 119; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 225; Kidner, *Genesis*, 156–7; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 306; Scullion, *Genesis*, 204–5; Speiser, *Genesis*, 210; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 212; von Rad, *Genesis*, 279; Vawter, *On Genesis*, 302; Waltke, *Genesis*, 381; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 443.

[310]See also NKJ, ASV and TNK.

reflect this reading of מִן as partitive. Genesis commentators such as Nahum M. Sarna, S. R. Driver and Robert Alter also support this position,[311] which I think more plausible than taking מִן as privative. In this case, then, Isaac's words can be understood as a blessing to Esau, promising the same kind of relationship to the land as that enjoyed by Jacob.

You Shall Live by Your Sword?

After predicting fertility for Esau, Isaac announces another mysterious prediction regarding Esau: וְעַל־חַרְבְּךָ תִּחְיֶה , *by your sword you shall live* (Gen. 27:40). As this expression only occurs here in the Hebrew Bible, the implication of *living by your sword* is not clear.[312] Most Genesis commentators have understood that the expression "you shall live by your sword" connotes violence and shows a negative portrayal of Esau's future. For example, Robert Alter comments that Esau "must make his way through violent struggle."[313] Hermann Gunkel understands living by the sword as living as a robber from murder and theft.[314] Gordon J. Wenham and Victor P. Hamilton assume that "by your sword you [Esau] will live" implies that Esau will live in war or plunder.[315] However, we need not suppose that the expression וְעַל־חַרְבְּךָ תִּחְיֶה , *by your sword you shall live* (Gen. 27:40), shows such a negative portrayal of Esau.

We need to reconsider whether the "sword" is the only possible translation for חֶרֶב in Isaac's blessing for Esau (Gen. 27:39-40). In the Hebrew

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[311]Alter, *Genesis*, 143; Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 247; Sarna, *Genesis*, 194.

[312]It is even questionable whether Isaac himself has understood the meaning of his utterance, although we as readers cannot know Isaac's intention.

[313]Alter, *Genesis*, 143.

[314]Gunkel, *Genesis*, 306.

[315]See Alter, *Genesis*, 143; Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 260–1; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 116; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 228; Sarna, *Genesis*, 194; Skinner, *Genesis*, 373; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 212; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 443.

Bible, the term חֶרֶב is usually used within military contexts[316] but we need not assume that חֶרֶב always functions as a military weapon. It can be also used for various purposes. There are several other usages of חֶרֶב in the Hebrew Bible. חֶרֶב can be understood as a flint knife used for circumcision (cf. Josh. 5:2, 3). In Exod. 20:25, חֶרֶב is a tool such as a chisel for stonework.[317] According to Isa. 34:5-7, חֶרֶב is used as a butcher's knife. It also symbolises justice (1 Kgs. 3:24; Isa. 66:16).[318] As shown by these examples, חֶרֶב in the Hebrew Bible does not always mean a *weapon*, even though it is usually translated as a "sword". It can refer to a *tool* such as a knife and chisel. As R. Christopher Heard points out, even if the meaning of חֶרֶב in Isaac's blessing for Esau means a sword as a weapon, we need not suppose that Esau will use this sword *against human beings.*[319] Genesis commentators' negative reading of "by your sword you shall live" seems to be based on the assumption that this is how Esau will use his חֶרֶב. However, Isaac's blessing could just as well imply that Esau, as a skillful hunter, will need a חֶרֶב — either as a weapon to hunt game or a tool to butcher captured animals.

This accords with the overall picture of Esau as an outdoor man and hunter. In Gen. 27:3, Isaac asked Esau to take a *quiver* and *bow*, go out to the field, and hunt game. The quiver and bow are certainly not the only tools that Esau will need for hunting. Isaac explicitly mentioned the quiver and the bow, but a hunter like Esau will also need other tools such as a spear and a knife. For hunting purposes, a hunter needs a knife rather than a sword — and חֶרֶב can mean a knife in Isaac's blessing for Esau (Gen. 27:40). Therefore, Isaac's

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[316]The phrases "fall by a sword, not of man" (Isa. 31:8; cf. Hos. 1:7) and "rule with the sword" (Mic. 5:5) occur several times. See O. Kaiser, "חֶרֶב", *TDOT* 5:159-160.

[317]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 116.

[318]O. Kaiser, "חֶרֶב", *TDOT* 5:157.

[319]Cf. R. Christopher Heard points out that animals are candidates too (cf. Deut. 13:15). See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 116.

prediction וְעַל־חַרְבְּךָ תִחְיֶה , *by your* חֶרֶב *you shall live* could be interpreted that Esau will continue to live as a skillful hunter.[320] "Living by *your* sword (or knife)" — thus not living by the sword of others — also connotes Esau's own part in his way of living.[321] The implication here is that Esau will look after himself. Isaac could eat game only with the help of Esau's hunting. However, unlike Isaac, Esau will hunt game for himself and live by using his own חֶרֶב , not relying upon someone who will hunt game for him. In a favourable reading of Esau, living by your sword could mean that Esau will continue to live as a hunter, looking after himself.

Whichever interpretation we favour for "living by your sword" — either "living in war and plunder" or "living as a hunter" —, the puzzle of Isaac's prediction is that we do not have any clear subsequent account as to whether Esau has really lived by his sword. Laurence A. Turner points out that this motif is not really developed and it is ironically Jacob rather than Esau who is explicitly connected with the word חֶרֶב in Genesis. Turner notes Laban's complaint that Jacob carried away his daughters "like captives of the sword" (Gen. 31:26).[322] John G. Gammie also notes the irony of Gen. 34:26 that it is Jacob's sons who "slew Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword" (Gen. 34:26).[323] Turner points out another association of Jacob with the sword.

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[320]See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 116; Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*, 106; Sarna, *Genesis*, 181. Cf. O. Kaiser comments, "The nomad, as a hunter and brigand, had to live by his sword." See O. Kaiser, "חֶרֶב", *TDOT* 5:159.

[321]Similarly, Bert Dicou comments, "The next part of the blessing, 'By your sword you shall live' also need not necessarily be interpreted as a curse. While Jacob will be able to live of 'plenty of grain and wine', Esau, whose land will not be very fertile, can make his living in another way." See Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist*, 119–20.

[322]Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 132.

[323]John G. Gammie, "Theological Interpretation by Way of Literary and Traditional Analysis: Genesis 25–36," in *Encounter with the Text: Form and History in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Martin J. Buss; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 124. Quoted from Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 132.

When Jacob gives one mountain slope[324] to Joseph, Jacob describes it as "the mountain slope that I took it from the hand of the Amorites with my *sword* and with my bow" (Gen. 48:22). Jacob's blessing for Simeon and Levi in Gen. 49:5 reminds readers of the violence that they have done with their *swords*:[325] שִׁמְעוֹן וְלֵוִי אַחִים כְּלֵי חָמָס מְכֵרֹתֵיהֶם , *Simeon and Levi are brothers; implements of violence are their swords.*[326] (My translation) As Turner and Gammie point out, Jacob is the one who is involved with the word חֶרֶב , *sword*, in his life. It is Jacob and his family who lived by the sword.

In contrast, Esau never uses a sword within the Esau-Jacob narrative. There is no textual evidence that Esau ever lived by a sword in the sense of living by war and plunder. When Esau meets Jacob again with his four hundred men, first-time readers may anticipate that Esau may use a sword against Jacob. However, Esau did not wield a sword against Jacob. As Esau did not live by the sword in terms of physical violence within the narrative, Turner supposes that Isaac's blessing has failed in this aspect.[327] However, Turner's understanding of *living by the sword* seems to be limited to the concept of physical violence. According to my reading of Genesis commentaries, other Genesis commentators' interpretations of "living by the sword" also do not go beyond the concept of physical violence. Another

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[324]It is not clear what incident Gen. 48:22 refers to within the book of Genesis. The phrase שְׁכֶם אַחַד (*one Shechem* or *one shoulder*) is very strange. שְׁכֶם (Shechem) in Gen. 48:22 seems to refer to district in northern Palestine (probably, shoulder of mount). Cf. Brown, et al., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, #7927; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 642–3; Sarna, *Genesis*, 330.

[325]Cf. Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 132.

[326]Instead of the term חֶרֶב , *sword*, the term מְכֵרָה is used here. The meaning of מְכֵרָה is not clear but it is probably the name of a weapon (cf. Brown, et al., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, #4380). As Gen. 36:26 records that Simeon and Levi slew Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword (חֶרֶב), it is reasonable to translate מְכֵרָה as sword.

[327]Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 132.

reading, I suggest, is that this phrase could legitimately have a metaphorical and psychological sense.

Interestingly, *living by the sword* in Korean metaphor often implies to live with bearing a grudge or hatred against someone. The Hebrew understanding of this metaphor, *living by the sword*, may not be equivalent to the Korean one, but the existence of the same metaphor in another cultural background at least challenges a scholarly view that narrows the concept of *living by the sword* only as physical violence. *Living by the sword* could mean to live with bearing a grudge (or hatred), not necessarily meaning to kill someone because of that grudge. The Hebrew Bible does not record other usages of *living by the sword* except Gen. 27:40, but reading *living by the sword* in relation to the next verse (Gen. 27:41) can support the inference that *living by your sword* does not have to refer to actual physical violence. Right after Isaac has finished blessing Esau, Gen. 27:41 shows Esau's reaction to his father's blessing:

וַיִּשְׂטֹם עֵשָׂו אֶת־יַעֲקֹב עַל־הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר בֵּרְכוֹ אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו
בְּלִבּוֹ יִקְרְבוּ יְמֵי אֵבֶל אָבִי וְאַהַרְגָה אֶת־יַעֲקֹב אָחִי׃

So Esau bore a grudge[328] *against Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him; and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob."* (NASB)

As Gen. 27:41 shows, Esau once *wanted to kill his brother Jacob* which, according to my suggestion, could mean Esau's *living by the sword.* As Isaac predicts, Esau *hated (or bore a grudge* against) Jacob and wanted to kill Jacob when his father passes away. Until Esau is able to forgive Jacob, he will live by the sword: *bearing a grudge* against Jacob. As Esau did not live by sword

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[328]The term שָׂטַם means "to bear (hold) a grudge" or "cherish animosity". See Brown, et al., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, #7852. Cf. Gen. 27:41; 50:15.

in terms of physical violence within the Esau-Jacob narrative, Turner is not incorrect in claiming that Isaac's blessing fails in this motif *living by the sword*, but readers can still conjecture the existence of Esau's hatred against Jacob (thus living by the sword) for a possible period of time. Rebekah expects that Esau's hatred will not last for long (Gen. 27:45). However, we do not know when Esau's anger against Jacob was softened.

Unlike Genesis commentators who understand Esau living by the sword quickly as a negative portrayal of Esau, I have suggested more favourable interpretations of Esau living by your sword. If one interprets Isaac's prediction "by your sword you shall live" only in terms of Esau's physical violence against human beings, this prediction becomes null and void in the narrative because Esau never lived by a sword in the sense of physical violence.

For this reason, Genesis commentators such as S. R. Driver and John Skinner do not relate the phrase *living by your sword* to Esau as an individual because they assume that Isaac's blessing given to Esau is exclusively for the future nation of Edom, not for Esau personally.[329] However, we need to note that Isaac directly utters his blessing to Esau. We cannot simply exclude Esau as an individual in regard to Isaac's blessing. As Turner points out, Isaac's dialogue with Esau reminds readers that the blessing deceitfully gained by Jacob is intended to cast its power over the lives of both Esau and Jacob:[330] "Behold, I have made him [Jacob] your master, and all of his relatives I have given to him as servants, and with grain and new wine I have sustained him. Now as for you then, what can I do, my son [Esau]?" (Gen. 27:37 NASB)

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[329]Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 261; Skinner, *Genesis*, 373; Cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 443. Claus Westermann relates the prediction "by your sword you shall live" to both Esau and his descendants.

[330]Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 118.

Isaac's comments suggest that his blessing for Esau (Gen. 27:39-40) is also meant for Esau at an individual level, not exclusively for Edom at a national level. Relating Esau living by the sword exclusively to Edom is not inevitable. Rather, the absence of the sword from Esau's subsequent story can be explained either because it was used in his hunting exploits, which are not recorded, or because the phrase is to be taken metaphorically, perhaps in the way suggested by Korean usage.

You Shall Serve Your Brother?

After Isaac predicts that Esau will live by the sword, he makes another ambiguous statement that וְאֶת־אָחִיךָ תַּעֲבֹד , *You [Esau] shall serve your brother* (Gen. 27:40). What does it mean that "Esau shall serve his brother"? Does it mean that Esau will become a servant or slave of Jacob and consequently work for Jacob? Most Genesis commentators have understood Isaac's statement "you shall *serve* your brother" in the sense of subjugation: Jacob or Israel's future subjugation of Esau or Edom.[331] For example, Gerhard von Rad regarded this statement as referring to David's subjugation of Edom (2 Sam. 8:10-14).[332] However, we need not suppose that Isaac's prediction "you shall serve your brother" connotes such a negative portrayal about Esau as suggested by Genesis commentators. The problem of interpreting "*Esau* עָבַד *Jacob*"[333] in the sense of subjugation is that Esau never comes under the control of Jacob in the Esau-Jacob narrative. Esau neither serves nor works for Jacob. One may think that Isaac's prediction has failed in this aspect, but we as readers also can speculate on Isaac's prediction from a different perspective.

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[331]Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 228; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 306; von Rad, *Genesis*, 279; Sarna, *Genesis*, 194; Scullion, *Genesis*, 206; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 443.

[332]von Rad, *Genesis*, 279.

[333]Reading left to right.

In the narrative context, I propose alternative interpretations which are more favourable to Esau than the Genesis commentators' version.
First of all, the statement "You shall serve your brother" can imply simply that Esau will have a sense of inferiority to Jacob. I have previously discussed how living by the sword could imply something other than physical violence, implying that Esau will live with bearing a grudge in his mind. Esau serving Jacob could also be understood as reflecting Esau's mental attitude. Unless Esau feels free from the fact that Jacob has stolen the blessing meant for Esau, Esau is no freer than if he was serving his brother physically. "You shall serve your brother" may imply that Esau will serve his brother in his mind because of the fact that he has lost the blessing meant for himself.

Secondly, Isaac's prediction "you shall serve your brother" can imply that Esau will *work* for Jacob, not necessarily as Jacob's servant but as his brother. עָבַד in the Hebrew Bible often implies the subjugation of one party to the other, but we need to note that there are various nuances of this term in the Hebrew Bible. Without an object, עָבַד usually means "to work."[334] When this verb is used with personal objects, עָבַד means "to serve" and often expresses the relationship between an עֶבֶד , *servant*, and his or her אָדוֹן , *lord* or *master*.[335] However, within a family circle the relationship between the one serving and the one served is different from the relationship described above. To serve someone within a family circle does not explicitly connote the concept of subjugation. When Jacob serves Laban (Gen. 29:15, 30; 30:26, 29; 31:6), the nuance of "to serve" here is *to work*. With the presupposition בְּ , *for*,

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[334]See H. Ringgren, "עָבַד", *TDOT* 10:381.

[335]H. Ringgren comments, "This relationship can take on various forms itself. It can be one of subjugation and dependence, of total claim on a person, or of loyalty. The dependency can be legal-social in the case of a slave serving a master (e.g. Exod. 21:6). This dependency could be also political when a vassal serves a lord (2 Kgs. 18:7)." See Ringgren, "עָבַד" *TDOT* 10:383.

Jacob is also portrayed as serving *for* Leah and Rachel (cf. Gen. 29:18, 20, 25; 31:41), but the nuance here is again *to work*. Jacob has *worked* for Laban's family, but his service was not done because he is powerless and subjugated to them. Jacob's relationship to Laban, Rachel, and Leah is not exactly the relationship between a servant and a master. One may regard Jacob's role as a servant before Laban and his two daughters, but this relationship is not really like a vassal serving a suzerain. Similarly, even though Isaac's blessing predicts that Esau will serve Jacob, I argue that the nuance here is closer to his "*working* for Jacob" as Jacob served Laban, Leah and Rachel.

Thirdly, Esau serving Jacob can imply that Esau will *help* (or offer a service to) Jacob as his brother, not explicitly as his slave. עָבַד in the Hebrew Bible can connote nuances such as giving a helping hand.[336] "You shall serve your brother" could mean that Esau will help or offer a service to Jacob but this need not be also understood in the sense of Esau being subjugated to Jacob. We also need not suppose that serving someone gives a negative impression of the one who serves, or vice versa. Being a servant does not always connote a negative impression. The portrayal of the servant in the book of Isaiah can help in this understanding of the servant as a positive figure.

Although Isaiah's servant songs (Isa. 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:2) have controversial elements over understanding who the servant is,[337]

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[336]Cf. Num. 3:8; 4:26, 47; 8:11,19, 22; 16:9; 18:6, 19; Isa. 28:21. Gerda Hoekveld-Meijer also suggests the nuance of "to help" for " עָבַד ". Although she does not specifically refer to the divine oracle given to Rebekah (Gen. 25:23), she seems to understand this verse as "Edom, the elder brother will help Israel, the younger one." See Hoekveld-Meijer, *Esau: Salvation in Disguise*, 79.

[337]In the traditional conservative view, the servant is considered to be the Messiah, based on Acts 8:26-39. Critical scholarship, however, has proposed other solutions to the identity of the servant of the songs. For further discussion, see F. Duane Lindsey, *The Servant Songs: A Study in Isaiah* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), xi. Various scholars who study the identity of the servant can be roughly summarised into two major categories: (1) those who identify the servant with an individual such as Isaiah or the Messiah and (2) those who identify the servant with a group such as ideal or spiritual Israel. See G. P. Hugenberger, "The Servant of the Lord in the 'Servant Songs' of Isaiah: A Second Moses Figure," in *The Lord's*

the suggestions offered bear witnesses to the honour of the position: corporate Israel, a prophet, a royal figure, a priest or even a second Moses.[338] The role of the servant in these servant songs is to bring justice to the nations (Isa. 42:1), to raise up the tribes of Jacob (Isa. 49:6), and to restore the preserved ones of Israel (Isa. 49:6). In Isa. 49:6, the servant's role becomes enlarged. The servant's mission is not only to restore Israel back from captivity but also to bring salvation to the nations (or the ends of the earth) spiritually. While the term עָבַד is not explicitly used in these servant songs, the role of the servant of Yahweh is clearly to *help* or *serve* Israel.[339] The servant of Yahweh cannot be regarded in the same light as the servant of Jacob, but what I intend to emphasise here is that the servant or the action of serving does not always convey negative impressions. Therefore, Esau serving Jacob can be interpreted more favourably and positively. It can imply that Esau will *help* his brother. It does not mean that Esau will become a slave of Jacob who must work for Jacob and live as a slave for the rest of his life. Brothers can help, and in that sense serve, each other. There is nothing shameful or dishonourable in this.

Although my interpretative proposals for Isaac's prediction for Esau serving Jacob are speculative to some extent, they still challenge unfounded negative scholarly assumptions about Isaac's blessing for Esau and offer alternative and more favourable readings of Esau serving Jacob than Genesis

Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts (ed. P. E. Satterthwaite, et al.; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 105–39.

[338]For further discussion, see Hugenberger, "The Servant of the Lord," 105–39.

[339]Gerda Hoekveld-Meijer suggests the positive nature of the "servant" from the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah. Hoekveld-Meijer comments, "In connection with Esau, commentaries like to emphasize the connotation of the verb to serve (עבד), in the sense of subjugation, but we can also follow Isaiah's concept of עבד. This 'slave' is the Servant of YHWH, who comes to serve Israel. The Servant of YHWH is the ideal servant, endowed with the spirit of YHWH (like the Edomite Othniel in Judg. 3:10; cf. Isa. 42:1), a *Salvation* to the end of the land/earth (Isa. 49:5-7) *in the disguise of a scapegoat*, bearing the sine of Israel (Isa. 49:6; Isa. 52:13). This Servant is formed to bring Jacob back (Isa. 49:5)." See Hoekveld-Meijer, *Esau: Salvation in Disguise*, 79.

commentators' version. These alternatives do not necessarily exclude each other in their interpretations, but it is also difficult to choose one of them as the most legitimate alternative.

I will not go beyond simply suggesting these alternatives in this section. More thought on the theme of who is serving whom between Esau and Jacob will be discussed further in the second section of next chapter: *Blessings Crossed: Re-thinking the Power of Isaac's Blessings over Esau and Jacob.* What I intended to emphasise here is that Esau serving Jacob does not necessarily show a negative portrayal of Esau. After all, he never serves Jacob in the sense of physical subjugation within the narrative. For this reason, many Genesis commentators seem to suggest that Isaac's blessing "you shall serve your brother" implies the subjugation of Jacob's descendants over the descendants of Esau (or Israel over Edom).[340] However, interpreting Esau serving Jacob exclusively as Edom serving Israel (or the descendants of Esau serving the descendants of Jacob) is not persuasive because Isaac directly addresses his blessing to Esau at first instance and Isaac himself has understood that his blessing is also meant for Esau and Jacob at an individual level as manifested in Gen. 27:37.[341] If Isaac's blessing for Esau (Gen. 27:39-40) is meant for referring to Esau's descendants, the word *descendants* would be mentioned just as the word *descendants* of Abraham is explicitly mentioned in God's speech to Abraham: "Know for certain that *your descendants* will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years." (Gen. 15:13 NASB)

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[340]Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 228; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 306; von Rad, *Genesis*, 279; Sarna, *Genesis*, 194; Scullion, *Genesis*, 206; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 443.

[341]Gen. 27:37 reads: "Behold, I have made him [Jacob] your master, and all of his relatives I have given to him as servants, and with grain and new wine I have sustained him. Now as for you then, what can I do, my son [Esau]?" (NASB)

You Shall Break His Yoke?

Finally, in his blessing for Esau (Gen. 27:39-40), Isaac predicts that וּפָרַקְתָּ עֻלּוֹ מֵעַל צַוָּארֶךָ , *and you [Esau] shall break his [Jacob's] yoke from your neck.* Compared to Isaac's previous puzzling statements that Esau will live by sword and serve his brother, Isaac's final statement "you shall break his yoke from your neck" presumably reflects a more positive aspect of Esau's future. The Hebrew Bible does not provide any clue about what an ancient yoke looked like, but it does not seem differ greatly from the yoke today in its function. The yoke is an agricultural instrument which is often used as a metaphor for forced labour (1 Kgs 12; 2 Chr. 10) or foreign domination (Jer. 27-28) in the Hebrew Bible. Regarding Isaac's prediction that Esau will break Jacob's yoke from his neck, most Genesis commentators have understood this as referring to the future nations: Edom's rebellion against Israel. For example, Gerhard von Rad understands it to refer to Edom escaping from the humiliating political bondage in Solomon's time (1 Kgs. 11:11-22, 25).[342] Unlike von Rad, Genesis commentators such as Claus Westermann and Victor P. Hamilton understand that Edom throws off Israel's dominion in the time of Jehoram (2 Kgs 8:20-22).[343] However, in regard to Jacob's *yoke* over Esau's neck, is this metaphor "yoke" used to refer to forced labour or foreign dominion between the future nations of Israel and Edom? Like Isaac's two previous statements, this blessing of "breaking a yoke" is not exclusively for a future nation of Edom. It is also meant for Esau in the first instance.

A more important question in understanding the implications of the yoke for the relationship between Esau and Jacob is who puts a yoke on whom

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[342]von Rad, *Genesis*, 279.

[343]Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 443; Cf. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 228; Waltke, *Genesis*, 381.

and who comes under a yoke. One of the major consequences of the yoke is that it signifies who determines one's action or who takes actions against whom. Is it Jacob who takes action against Esau? By stealing a blessing, symbolically Jacob may be regarded as having put a yoke on Esau's neck. Until Esau feels free from the loss of his blessing from his father, he will not be able to break Jacob's yoke. "Breaking Jacob's yoke" can be understood in relation to Isaac's previous predictions "you shall live by the sword" and "you shall serve your brother" (Gen. 27:40). According to my favourable readings of Isaac's blessing for Esau, Esau will continuously live by the sword, implying that he will live bearing a grudge. "You shall serve your brother" does not necessarily mean that Esau becomes a slave of Jacob, but it can possibly imply that Esau will have a sense of inferiority to Jacob or Esau will mentally serve Jacob. In view of these, I suggest that living by the sword and serving his brother could be understood as the yoke that Jacob puts on Esau's neck.

Within the Esau-Jacob story, breaking of the yoke needs to be reflected in a scene where Esau meets Jacob again (Genesis 33). It is noteworthy that the narrator here describes Esau falling on Jacob's צַוָּאר , *neck*, and kissing him (Gen. 33:4). Regarding this scene, Frank A. Spina comments: "Esau falls compassionately on his brother's neck, embracing and kissing him (Gen. 33:4). And that is how Esau frees himself. Forgiveness, not the sword, is his preferred "weapon" in his dealings with his brother."[344] I agree with Spina that Esau has freed himself by forgiving Jacob, not using a sword against his brother. Esau breaking Jacob's yoke can be understood in light of his forgiving Jacob. Once Esau forgives Jacob, Esau does not need to serve Jacob in whatever sense—either physically or mentally. Esau is not a servant of Jacob.

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[344]Spina, "Esau: The Face of God," 27.

He no longer needs to bear a grudge against Jacob. It is in fact Esau who has lived a freer life than Jacob. Jacob has been bound to his uncle Laban while he was working for him. By the time he runs away from Laban and meets Esau again, he has not been quite free from his uncle's influence. Jacob was also afraid of his brother Esau and so was not free from his brother. When Jacob meets Esau again, he cannot help addressing Esau as lord (Gen. 33:8, 13, 14) because of his fear of Esau. It is ironically Jacob who actually lived under the yoke of Esau: the fear of his brother Esau.

In this section, *The Nature of Isaac's Blessing for Esau*, I have discussed whether Isaac's prediction for Esau is a blessing or a curse. While most Genesis commentators and scholars understood Isaac's words for Esau in Gen. 27:39-40 as in effect a curse (or a secondary blessing at best) and have read them negatively, I have pointed out their negative assumptions about this blessing and offered more favourable alternative readings of Isaac's blessing for Esau. Living by the sword and serving one's brother is not necessarily a negative statement. Breaking the yoke contains a more positive aspect of Esau's future. As many aspects of Isaac's blessing for Esau are ambiguous, it is difficult to figure out whether Isaac's blessing has been fulfilled or not. In regard to the fertility of the earth and dews of heaven above, certainly Esau has prospered as a man now leading four hundred men as the narrative shows (Gen. 32:6; 33:1; cf. Gen. 33:9). He has lived "from" the land (אֶרֶץ , or *earth*) , not "away from" the land. Esau did not need to leave the land of Canaan like Jacob, and he also lived in the land of Seir (Gen. 32:3; 33:16; 36:8). Therefore, translating מִן in Gen. 27:39 as partitive (thus, *from the fertility of the earth shall your dwelling be*) fits well with the overall portrayal of Esau within the narrative. It is not clear in what sense Esau lived by the sword. The narrative never reveals Esau's use of the sword. Esau also does not serve Jacob his

brother within the narrative, but he may have lived with bearing a grudge and have a sense of inferiority to Jacob which I suggested as a possible implication of these expressions. I have also suggested that Esau breaks Jacob's yoke by forgiving his brother and what he has done. Isaac's blessing for Esau may be considered as less significant than Isaac's blessing for Jacob. However, Isaac's blessing for Esau is at least a secondary blessing[345] — not a curse at all.

2. The Blessing for Esau Compared with the Several Blessings for Jacob

For a better understanding of Esau's narrative role in light of the blessing given to him, the nature of Isaac's blessing for Esau needs to be compared with the nature of several blessings given to Jacob. When Esau realises that Jacob has stolen the blessing meant for him (Gen. 27:36-37), Esau asks Isaac whether Isaac has not reserved any other blessing for him. Isaac at first understands that he has only one blessing to bestow — the blessing that Isaac believes he has bestowed upon Esau but was in fact given to Jacob. He knows nothing about other kinds of blessings at first (Gen. 27:37). However, the consequent narrative plot shows that paternal blessing is not something that a father can announce only once to his son within his entire life. This blessing of a father — or even a deathbed blessing — surely can be repeated and there is more than one kind of blessing in the Esau-Jacob narrative. For example, in Gen. 28:1-4 when Isaac sends Jacob to Paddan-aram, Isaac blesses Jacob again and mentions that he also wants Jacob to receive the *blessing of Abraham*.

Most Genesis commentators and scholars have not given their attention to how many kinds of blessings are present in the Esau-Jacob narrative. While

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[345]Frank A. Spina has stated that Isaac's blessing for Esau is at best a secondary blessing. However, I think that it is *at least* a secondary blessing. Cf. Spina, "Esau: The Face of God," 20.

scholars such as Jan P. Fokkelman and Devora Steinmetz do discuss different kinds of blessings in the Esau-Jacob narrative,[346] neither of them is interested in the numbers of different kinds of blessings. This suggests two questions: How many kinds of blessings are present in the Esau-Jacob narrative? Does it really matter how many blessings Jacob has received? I think yes. The fact that Jacob has received more blessings than Esau may give a good impression to readers, but it will also make readers confused if these blessings are not coherent in their nature.

Before categorising these different kinds of blessings, the concept of blessing in the patriarchal narrative needs to be briefly discussed. Several Genesis scholars, including Claus Westermann and Allen P. Ross, have discussed the concept of blessing in the patriarchal narrative.[347] For example, Claus Westermann's *Blessing: In the Bible and the Life of the Church*[348] is one of the earliest and most widely cited works that dealt with the concept of blessing in the Bible. In regard to blessing in Genesis 27, Claus Westermann has analysed the essential elements as follows:

> (1) The blessing is the power of life handed on from father to son.
> (2) The father has only one blessing to bestow.
> (3) Blessing cannot be recalled, and it works unconditionally.
> (4) The time when blessing is bestowed is when the father awaits his death.
> (5) The bestowal of blessing, or its transfer to the son, follows a clearly identifiable ritual, including a series of actions and the words of blessing.

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[346]Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 99, 111, 182. n.53. Similarly, Frank Crüsemann states that "the promise of blessing is renewed in the dream at Bethel, but there is no mention of dominion over his brother." See Crüsemann, "Dominion, Guilt, and Reconciliation," 70.

[347]Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 66; Claus Westermann, *Blessing: In the Bible and the Life of the Church* (trans. Keith Crim; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

[348]Westermann, *Blessing*.

> (6) Blessing here still has a pre-theological character. In the ritual and in the words of blessing God is not mentioned, and it is not even said that, in the blessing Isaac bestows, God is the one who blesses.[349]

Westermann explains the nature of blessing in Genesis 27 in general terms, but some of his points are not based on careful reading of the Esau-Jacob story. For example, Westermann simply accepts Isaac's statement that there is only *one* blessing to bestow on his son.[350] Depending on how we understand various blessings in the Esau-Jacob narrative, we can count the numbers of blessings in a different way. As shown by Westermann's example, many Genesis commentators seem to assume that there is only one irrevocable blessing and they are not interested in counting the actual numbers of these blessings.[351] Blessing is a very complex concept and there are certainly several blessings present in the Esau-Jacob narrative. I suggest that the narrator included at least seven blessings in the Esau-Jacob narrative:

(1) Isaac's blessing for Esau in Gen. 27:39-40
(2) Isaac's first blessing for Jacob in Gen. 27:27-29 (hereafter, **Blessing for Jacob I**)
(3) Isaac's second blessing for Jacob in Gen. 28:1-4 before Isaac sends Jacob to Paddan-aram
(hereafter, **Blessing for Jacob II**)
(4) blessing called *blessing of Abraham* in Gen. 28:4 which Isaac wished that God may give to Jacob in the future
(hereafter, **Blessing for Jacob III**)
(5) God's promise to Jacob in his dream at Bethel which is close to *blessing* in its nature (hereafter, **Blessing for Jacob IV**)

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[349]Westermann, *Blessing*, 54–5.

[350]In addition, Westermann explains that a father bestows blessing *when he awaits his death*. See Westermann, *Blessing*, 54–5. Ironically, however, Isaac lived until the age of 108 which means that he has lived on more than 20 years even after he thought he was about to die. According to the Esau-Jacob story, Jacob has spent about twenty years at Laban's house and comes to bury his father Isaac with Esau.

[351] Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 479; Scullion, *Genesis*, 205; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 211.

(6) blessing of the mysterious man which Jacob comes to gain after his wrestling with this man at the Jabbok in Gen. 32:29 (hereafter, **Blessing for Jacob V**)
(7) God's blessing for Jacob after his safe return to Bethel in Gen. 35:9-12 (hereafter, **Blessing for Jacob VI**)

The blessings given to Jacob are at least sixfold. Hereafter, I will read the single blessing given to Esau (Gen. 27:39-40) in light of the sixfold blessings given to Jacob and argue that several blessings given to Jacob is nothing special compared to the blessing for Esau.

Comparison with the Blessing for Jacob I (Gen. 27:27-29)

One may suppose that the first blessing given to Jacob (cf. Gen. 27:27-29) is in its nature completely different from the single blessing given to Esau (Gen. 27:39-40), but Isaac's blessing for Esau shares some elements in common with the blessing given to Jacob. The majority of Genesis commentators have not considered the words given to Esau in Gen. 27:39-40 as a blessing.[352] Frank A. Spina, who interprets Esau in a more positive way than other scholars, still comments, "There can be no question that Jacob receives from his father the primary blessing, while Esau receives at best a secondary blessing."[353] Yet one cannot simply assert that the blessings for Jacob are obviously better than the single blessing for Esau without a detailed comparison. In these paternal blessings, one blessing may be presented as being better than the other. However, if we look at these blessings apart from a value-judgment perspective, we will find out that these are just different kinds

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[352]Cotter, *Genesis*, 204; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 306; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 228; Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 480; Skinner, *Genesis*, 373; Spina, "Esau: The Face of God," 20; Waltke, *Genesis*, 381.

[353]Spina, "Esau: The Face of God," 20.

of blessing which cannot be easily evaluated. Even if one evaluates blessings according to certain categories, it is difficult to establish objective categories to judge the worthiness of a certain blessing.

One of the legitimate categories to evaluate blessing, if necessary, could be the effect of the blessing on one's life because Isaac's blessings for Esau and Jacob are his wish or prediction for the future of his sons. Paternal blessing means certainly more than a mere prophecy that predicts what will happen in the future. It generally expresses a strong wish by a father in regard to the future of his sons. The future predicted in a paternal blessing, however, does not always guarantee that this future will come true or the one who received a primary blessing will prosper compared to the other who gained a secondary blessing. In fact, a blessing which is worked out in the character's future life is surely more significant than one which is not. This is particularly applicable to Esau and Jacob. Given that Jacob's future will not be like what Isaac's blessing has predicted, can one legitimately judge the blessing for Jacob as better than the blessing for Esau?

Now let us compare the blessing given to Esau along with the first blessing given to Jacob (the "blessing for Jacob I") in detail.

> ***(Blessing for Esau)*** *Behold, from the fertility of the earth shall your dwelling be, and from the dew of the heavens above; and by your sword you shall live and you shall serve your brother but as you wander you shall break his yoke from your neck (Gen. 27:39-40 My Translation).*

> ***(Blessing for Jacob I)*** *See ! The smell of my son is like the smell of the field which Yahweh has blessed (him). May Elohim give to you from the dew of the heavens and the fertility of the earths and an abundance of grain and new wine. Nations may serve you and peoples may bow down to you. Be a lord for your brothers and the sons of your mother may bow down to you;*

Those who curse you will be cursed and those who bless you will be blessed (Gen. 27:27-29 My Translation).

In the form and content of both blessings, Isaac interestingly announces his paternal blessings with an exclamatory expression such as רְאֵה (*see*) or הִנֵּה (behold). Isaac also mentions "the dew of the heaven" and "the fertility of the earth" in both blessings. By these expressions Isaac wishes a kind of agricultural fertility[354] or wealth for both sons. As Isaac wished, both Esau and Jacob actually prosper in the Esau-Jacob story. What Isaac blesses is primarily the future of both sons. The core of "the blessing for Jacob I" is his relationship with others: being a lord over his family, all the nations and peoples. In the blessing for Esau, the main theme is Esau's lifestyle (living as an outdoor man) and his relationship only with his brother. Thus, both blessings are similar in that Isaac announces future fertility and the nature of each son's relationship with others.

There are more differences than similarities in these blessings. First, the "blessing for Jacob I" is longer than the blessing for Esau. The blessing of Isaac for Jacob contains a threefold statement of what Jacob is (Gen. 27:27), what he will receive (Gen. 27:28), and his relationship with others (Gen. 27:29),[355] but the blessing of Isaac for Esau does not contain the statement of what Esau is. Unlike the "blessing for Jacob I", the blessing given to Esau does not directly mention what he will receive. Rather, it is about the place where Esau will live. While the "blessing for Jacob I" shows that God (Elohim) will *give to Jacob* "the dew of the heaven" and "the fertility of the earth", the blessing given to Esau simply indicates that *Esau's dwelling* shall be from the fertility of the earth and the dew of the heaven. Interestingly, the

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[354]Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 221.

[355]Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 221.

two phrases "the dew of the heaven" and "the fertility of the earth" are placed in reverse order in the blessing given to Esau.

Jacob seemingly has received further elements of fertility by the mention of an abundance of grain (דָּגָן , *dagan*) and new wine (תִּירוֹשׁ , *tirosh*), but the two phrases, grain (דָּגָן , *dagan*) and new wine (תִּירוֹשׁ , *tirosh*), could on the contrary give readers a negative impression on the blessing for Jacob because of their linguistic connection with Canaanite deities. The terms Dagan and Tirosh are well known names of Canaanite deities. Dagan is a Philistine deity and Tirosh is a Canaanite god. Tirosh is a kind of Bacchus and there is a possibility that the Hebrews could have obtained their poetic word "wine" from this term.[356] M. J. Dahood thus translates Gen. 27:27 as follows: "May God given you the dew of Heaven and of the oil of Earth and of the spray of Dagan and Tirosh."[357] In this translation, Canaanite gods such as Heaven, Earth, Dagan, and Tirosh can be considered a source of fertility. Although this translation is very peculiar, it raises the possibility that the longer blessing of Jacob could possibly arouse suspicions or negative impression from readers. Whether a longer blessing is certainly better than a shorter one is therefore very questionable. The fact that Jacob has received more elements in blessing does not necessarily mean that he has received a better blessing than Esau.

Secondly, Isaac mentions the name of God אֱלֹהִים , *Elohim* when he blesses Jacob, but he does not mention any name of God when he blesses Esau. Does this mean that Isaac's blessing for Esau is no more than his personal wish for Esau where God is not involved and cannot bring it to fruition? If we compare this with Jacob's blessings for his twelve sons, we can

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[356]Quoted from M. C. Astour, "Some New Divine Names From Ugarit," *JAOS* 86 (1966): 284; A. Cooper, "Divine Names and Epithets in the Ugaritic Texts." *RSP* 3:428. Quoted from Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 221.

[357]M. J. Dahood, review of *Ugaritica V* in *Or* 39 (1970): 376. Quoted from Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 221.

infer that this is very unlikely. When Jacob blesses his twelve sons later in his old age, he also does not mention the name of God for most of his sons except his favourite son Joseph. Although Benjamin was Jacob's favourite as well, the name of God was not mentioned in the blessing given to Benjamin. Even in a blessing given to Judah, who has received a more honourable blessing than other brothers,[358] Jacob does not mention the name of God at all. Mentioning the name of God in one's blessing may give readers a good impression or make one blessing sound more religious or special than any other blessing. However, the use of the name of God in a blessing does not necessarily guarantee that this blessing is more likely to come to fruition than the blessing which does not mention the name of God. According to the Esau-Jacob story, there is no evidence that the "blessing for Jacob I" is more effective than the blessing given to Esau.

Thirdly, it is only in the narrative scene where Isaac is going to bless Jacob that references to various bodily senses are embedded. However, the references to these senses in this scene paradoxically confirm that Jacob is not the one who deserved to get this blessing. Gen. 27:22-23 reads: *So Jacob came close to Isaac his father, and he felt him and said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." And he [Isaac] did not recognise him [Jacob], because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he [Isaac] blessed him [Jacob] (NASB)*. In this narrative scene, the four senses of hearing, touching, tasting and smelling tell both truths and lies. Isaac's sense of *hearing* tells him the truth that the one who is asking for a fatherly

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[358]The blessing given to Judah reads, "Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down, he couched like a lion, and as a lioness; who dares rouse him up? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Biding his foal to the vine and his ass's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes; his eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk." (Gen. 49: 9-12 RSV)

blessing now is not Esau the firstborn but Jacob. However, Isaac trusts his sense of touching, tasting, and smelling, and thus he ends up blessing Jacob. Before Isaac blesses Jacob, he *touches* the skins of the kids upon Jacob's hands and he believes that he has *touched* Esau's hands (Gen. 27:22). Isaac *tastes* the savoury food that Rebekah prepared and Jacob has brought (Gen. 27:25), and he *smells* the smell of Esau's garment that Jacob wears instead (Gen. 27:27). What Isaac touched, tasted, and smelled was Esau in Isaac's perception, but it was in fact Jacob in reality. The readers thus watch Isaac's failure to make the correct deduction from his own sensory impressions.

It is noteworthy that Isaac announces blessing by mentioning *the smell of the one* who will receive his blessing, saying that "the smell of my son is *like the smell of the field* (כְּרֵיחַ שָׂדֶה) that Yahweh has blessed" (Gen. 27:27). Isaac believes that the recipient of this blessing is the one who has the smell of the field. Obviously, Isaac believes that the one who he is going to bless now is Esau whom he regards as a man of the field, a man who has a smell of the field. In the "blessing for Jacob I", the smell has nothing to with the contents of blessing itself, but it functions to designate who the recipient of this blessing should be – Esau.[359]

Sidney Breitbart's argument counters my argument above. Breitbart argues that Isaac knew it was *Jacob* to whom he gave his innermost blessing because Isaac smelled his clothes but did not touch them, not wanting to face the possibility that it is Esau before him.[360] However, Breitbart overlooks the narrator's previous comment in Gen. 27:23, "and he [Isaac] *did not recognise him [Jacob]* (וְלֹא הִכִּירוֹ), because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's

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[359]According to Susan Niditch, Esau's hairiness is also related to with smelling of the field. Niditch comments, "Hair is identity or assumed identity, animal-like, thick, smelling of the fields. Strong contrast in gender and gender bending is created by the imagery of hair,, and all kinds of interesting stereotypes are at play." See Niditch, "Dancing with Chains," 15.

[360]Sidney Breitbart, "The Problem of Deception in Genesis 27," *JBQ* 29 (2001): 46.

hands." Whether Isaac did not want to touch Jacob's clothes is not clear from the text. Breitbart further argues that the statement "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that the Lord had blessed" shows that it could not apply to Esau for he was a hunter, while it was Jacob who tended the fields.[361] However, the narrator never describes Jacob as a man of the field. It is only later that Jacob tends flocks in the field (cf. Gen. 31:4) while he was staying with Laban. The narrator never tells us that Jacob tended the field before he left for Paddan-aram. He was a man who used to dwell in a tent (Gen. 25:27). The "blessing for Jacob I" is therefore noteworthy in that it clearly designates its recipient by pointing out the smell of the recipient. However, Jacob deceived his father's sense of smell by wearing Esau's garment but Jacob cannot be designated as a man of that smell. Jacob who usually stays at home is not a man of the field and therefore the very first part of the blessing "the smell of my son is like the smell of the field which Yahweh has blessed" does not apply to Jacob at all. The "blessing for Jacob I" designates Esau as a recipient.

Fourthly, what makes the "blessing for Jacob I" distinctive from the blessing for Esau is the promise of Jacob's supremacy over others. Peoples are supposed to serve and bow down to the recipient of this blessing. Closer to home, the "blessing for Jacob I" also announces that the recipient of this blessing will be a lord over his brothers and mother's sons. Who are his *brothers* and *mother's sons* (לְאַחֶיךָ and בְּנֵי אִמֶּךָ)? This may refer to Jacob's (or Esau's) own brothers, but the book of Genesis does not record that Isaac and Rebekah had other children besides Esau and Jacob. This phrase needs to be understood from a different perspective.

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[361]Breitbart, "The Problem of Deception," 46.

Brothers or mother's sons are often used as a poetic expression in the Hebrew Bible.[362] Brothers and mother's sons do not necessarily refer to Jacob's blood brothers, because Jacob has only one brother, Esau. The "blessing for Jacob I" does not explicitly announce his supremacy over his brother Esau. It is rather a general statement of his supremacy over many peoples. For example, when Jacob arrived at Haran, he calls people in that land אַחַי, *my brothers* (Gen. 29:4). In Gen. 31:46 where Jacob speaks to Laban, the narrator describes it as "Jacob said to *his brothers*" in a plural form although Jacob talked to one person. "Mother's sons" appears in Psalm 69:8 and Song 1:6. This is also a poetic expression rather than referring to family members directly. Accordingly, the "blessing for Jacob I" does not explicitly indicate that the recipient of this blessing will be a lord over his one blood brother—either Esau or Jacob. What clearly indicates the relationship with one's brother is the blessing for Esau—"you shall serve your brother" (Gen. 27:40).

Finally, the blessing for Esau does not contain the last part of the "blessing for Jacob I": "Those who curse you will be cursed and those who bless you will be blessed." (Gen. 27:29) This promise about curse/blessing is similar to the last part of God's initial promise given to Abraham: *And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed* (Gen. 12:3 NASB). It is also similar to Num. 24:9: *Blessed is everyone who blesses you, And cursed is everyone who curses you* (NASB).[363] However, this part of the blessing contains irony. Who are those that qualify for "those who curse you"? Esau and Laban may be candidates for this group. Scholars such as Victor P.

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[362]See Ps. 50:20; Judg. 8:19; Cf. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 222; Sarna, *Genesis*, 193.

[363]Cf. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 222.

Hamilton note that it is Esau who curses Jacob.[364] However, the term אָרַר, *to curse*, is not explicitly used in any of Esau's speeches. The intention to kill someone can be regarded as a curse against that person. However, even if Esau is the one who curses Jacob, is Esau in turn really cursed in the narrative? Nothing in the Esau-Jacob narrative indicates that Esau's life is cursed.

Besides, who are those that qualify as "those who bless you"? Isaac can be regarded as one who qualifies as blessing Jacob.[365] Then, did Isaac wish that he will be blessed by his very act of blessing his son? A mysterious man at the Jabbok also blessed Jacob (Gen. 32:29; MT 32:30), but it is not clear in what way this man becomes blessed in the Esau-Jacob story. It is ironic that those who may be regarded as cursing Jacob were not cursed at all and that one who blesses Jacob is his father Isaac. Regardless of this blessing given to Jacob, all Jacob experiences in his life are his struggle with his uncle, his brother, and people.

As I have discussed above, the "blessing for Jacob I" contains many ironic elements. At first sight, this blessing may look full of splendid words but some of them are ambiguous and ironic. Is this blessing certainly better than the blessing for Esau? More importantly, this "blessing for Jacob I" is not meant for Jacob. Thus, the "blessing for Jacob I" does not come to fulfilment according to the plot development of the Esau-Jacob story, particularly in terms of the servanthood. No one serves Jacob at all. This blessing, rather, works for Esau's life, although he has not directly received it from Isaac. Esau has prospered as a leader with four hundred men (Gen. 32:6; 33:1). His brother Jacob respected him as a lord (Gen. 32:4-5; 32:18; 33:8, 13-15). In fact, Jacob may be regarded as one who curses Esau by deceiving his brother and stealing

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[364]Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 222.

[365]Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 222.

the blessing meant for Esau. Jacob had to pay the price by being deceived by his uncle Laban in regard to his marriage to Rachel and working for Laban over twenty years (cf. Genesis 29-31). He became a disabled person after his struggle with a mysterious man (cf. Gen. 32:31; MT 32:32). He lost his favourite wife Rachel (Gen. 35:19). His daughter Dinah was raped[366] by Shechem (Gen.34:2). His sons Levi and Simeon slaughtered Shechemites (Genesis 34) and made Jacob fearful of revenge from the inhabitants in Canaan. Jacob was deceived by his sons (Genesis 37) and went through the pain of believing that he has lost his favourite son Joseph. He lived as a wanderer, never settling in one place. As Jacob himself confesses before Pharaoh, the days of his life have been evil (רָעִים) (Gen. 47:9).[367]

Would readers regard Jacob's life as a life blessed by God? Frank Crüsemann explains that it is guilt and the way in which this guilt is handled by Jacob himself and Rebekah which cause the non-fulfilment of the divine oracle. Crüsemann further points out that, as both Rebekah and Jacob try to realise what God has pledged through questionable means, it cannot be fulfilled.[368] Crüsemann does not give much emphasis to what Isaac said in his blessing for Jacob, but his theological explanation about the divine oracle is also applicable to the "blessing for Jacob I" gained by deceit. As Jacob has attempted to gain the paternal blessing by questionable means, this blessing

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[366]Several scholars such as Lyn M. Bechtel suggest that Dinah is not raped. Bechtel suggests that the verb עָנָה in Gen. 32:2 does not necessarily imply a "physical violence" here. As there is no use of force or a cry of help from the woman, she claims that Dinah is not raped, and Jacob and Dinah are described as folks who are interested in interacting with the Shechemites. Whether Dinah is raped or not, however, it is clear from the text that this incident has brought a big trouble for Jacob's family and it is regarded by Jacob's sons (e.g. Levi and Simeon) as shameful for his family (cf. Gen. 34:7, 31). For further discussion, see Lyn M. Bechtel, "What If Dinah Is Not Raped? (Genesis 34)," *JSOT* 62 (1994): 19–36.

[367]רַע means "bad","evil", "malignant","unpleasant","giving pain, unhappiness, misery", "displeasing". Cf. Brown, et al., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, #7451.

[368]Crüsemann, "Dominion, Guilt, and Reconciliation," 74–5.

becomes corrupted and collapsed. There are no other incidents of a blessing being stolen in the Bible. Blessing is not something that someone can steal from others. The "blessing for Jacob I" was not really bestowed upon Jacob.

***Comparison with the Blessings for Jacob II and III* (Gen. 28:1-4)**

> ***(Blessing for Jacob II & III)*** *Arise, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother's father; and from there take to yourself a wife from the daughters of Laban your mother's brother. And May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May He also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you; that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham (Gen. 28:2-4 NASB).*

Before Isaac sends Jacob to Paddan-aram, he announces another blessing for Jacob ("Blessing for Jacob II"). In this blessing, Isaac also mentions בִּרְכַּת אַבְרָהָם , *the blessing of Abraham* ("Blessing for Jacob III"). While the blessing for Esau is a single blessing, Jacob encounters several blessings within the narrative. The question that I intend to discuss in this section is whether the blessing of Abraham ("Blessing for Jacob III") is intrinsically different from Isaac's first blessing for Jacob ("Blessing for Jacob I") or his second blessing for Jacob ("Blessing for Jacob II"). Should Jacob, who has already gained his father's blessing, also receive his grandfatherly blessing which is called the "blessing of Abraham" to become a true heir of Abraham's line? What is the blessing of Abraham? Is the blessing of Abraham something like getting a land or being a great nation? Does Jacob need to receive several blessings instead of single blessing to become the chosen one? Comparison of these blessings shows the ambiguous nature of blessings in the Esau-Jacob narrative. Isaac's blessing for Esau in Gen. 27:39-40 needs to be

compared with the several blessings for Jacob, including the blessing of Abraham, rather than simply assuming that these blessings for Jacob are obviously better than Isaac's blessing for Esau. Before we discuss the question whether the blessing of Abraham is intrinsically different from Isaac's first or second blessing of Jacob, we need to look at what blessing of Abraham is.

Let us look at *the blessing of Abraham* ("Blessing for Jacob III") in the narrative context. Interestingly, the expression בִּרְכַּת אַבְרָהָם , *the blessing of Abraham* is never mentioned in the Abraham narrative. Only the concept of *the blessing of Abraham* is implied in the Abraham narrative. Earlier in Gen. 12:1-3, God promised for the first time that He will make of Abraham a great nation and make his name great. Gen. 12:1-3 reads:

> *Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (NASB)*

In this divine speech given to Abraham, there are several promises embedded. Laurence A. Turner notes *five promises* from this speech based on the imperatives: (1) I will make of you a great nation (Gen. 12:2a), (2) I will bless you (Gen. 12:2b), (3) I will make your name great (Gen. 12:2c), (4) I will bless those who bless you (Gen. 12:3a), and (5) I will curse those who curse you (Gen. 12:3b).[369]

In these five promises, there is some overlap. God promised that He will bless Abraham, but making Abraham a great nation and making his name great is also close to *divine blessing for Abraham* (thus, the blessing of

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[369]Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 58.

Abraham) in its nature. In the Abraham narrative, unlike Isaac who blessed Esau and Jacob with a certain ritual, God does not directly take any action to bless Abraham. God, unlike Isaac, does not eat food before He blesses Abraham but the very words that He spoke to Abraham contain blessings for Abraham. *God's promise* given to Abraham in Gen. 12:1-3 is the closest that can be regarded as a kind of *God's blessing* for Abraham.

This theme of *blessing of Abraham* is slightly modified and repeated in Genesis 22. After testing Abraham by commanding him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering, God promises that He will indeed *bless* Abraham and make his זֶרַע (seed, descendants, or offspring) as numerous as the stars of the heaven and the sands on the seashore (Gen. 22:17). He also promises that Abraham's זֶרַע will possess the gate of their enemies and that all the nations of the earth will be blessed by Abraham's זֶרַע (cf. Gen. 22:18). The *blessing of Abraham* is not directly mentioned in the Abraham narrative, but there is a strong implication of this in promises given to Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:1-3; Gen. 22:17-18) such as making Abraham a great nation (or making his descendants as numerous), making his name great, and meditating God's blessing to others. Does then Isaac himself show this understanding of the *blessing of Abraham* in the Esau-Jacob narrative?

To examine how Isaac has understood the blessing of Abraham, let us now look at what he said in his second blessing for Jacob ("Blessing for Jacob II"). Isaac's second blessing for Jacob consists of several aspects: (1) Paternal command to take a wife within a family circle (Gen. 28:1-2), (2) Paternal wish for fruitfulness and prosperity (Gen. 28:3), (3) Paternal wish for Jacob and his descendants to receive the blessing of Abraham (Gen. 28:4), (4) Paternal wish for Jacob to possess the land which God has given to Abraham (Gen. 28:4).

The first element is about Jacob's suitable marriage partner.[370] The second element of wishing Jacob to be fruitful and multiply is similar to God's command given to living creatures, including humanity, in Genesis 1 (cf. Gen. 1:22, 28). It wishes for Jacob's prosperity as a nation. The third element is a wish for Jacob to receive the blessing of Abraham. The jussive implied in the context suggests a strong wish,[371] and it indicates that God *has not given* Jacob the blessing of Abraham *yet*. In the fourth element, Isaac wishes that *as a result of receiving the blessing of Abraham*[372] Jacob may possess the land which God has given to Abraham.

While the blessing of Abraham implied in the Abraham narrative primarily indicates making Abraham a great nation and his name great, the blessing of Abraham mentioned by Isaac renders this blessing of Abraham differently. The blessing of Abraham, according to Isaac, is to be fruitful, multiply, and become a company of peoples, and thus possess a land which God has given to Abraham. Compared with the blessing of Abraham implied in the Abraham narrative (cf. Gen. 12:1-3; 22:17-18), the blessing of Abraham understood by Isaac gives more emphasis on the ownership of the land. The result of receiving the blessing of Abraham is to possess the land of Jacob's sojournings, which God gave to Abraham.

Compared with *the blessing of Abraham* implied in the Abraham narrative (Gen. 12:1-3; Gen. 22:17-18), Isaac's second blessing for Jacob thus intensifies the theme of the land. In Isaac's first blessing for Jacob "May God

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[370]From Isaac's point of view expressed in Gen. 28:2, Jacob's suitable marriage partner should be sought from the daughters of Laban.

[371]Although there is not a unique form for jussive here, the context nuances jussive in its meaning.

[372]With preposition ל, the syntax of לְרִשְׁתֶּךָ is close to consequence or result. Cf. Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline* (2nd ed.; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), #198.

give you of the dew of the heaven, and of the fatness of the earth" (Gen. 27:28), Isaac alluded the fertility of the land for Jacob but he did not strongly emphasise its ownership. Therefore, Isaac's understanding of the blessing of Abraham shown by his second blessing for Jacob ("Blessing for Jacob II") is different from the blessing of Abraham in the previous narrative in terms of Isaac's understanding of the land.

The land is a very frequently used but contradictory theme in the book of Genesis. First of all, we need to note that the land was not essentially part of God's blessing for Abraham. It is rather a supplementary gift supposed to be given to Abraham as a result of God's blessing for Abraham,[373] but this gift was not given to Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob after all. The land theme is first announced in Gen. 12:1, but here the land is not presented as one of God's promises. God simply commanded Abraham to go the land that He will show him. It is hard to take this statement as God's promise of the land. Later in Gen. 12:7, God told Abraham that He will give "this land" (seemingly, the Shechem area in the narrative context) to his זֶרַע (*seed, offspring*, or *descendants*), but it was not given to Abraham personally at this time. In Gen. 15:7, God tells Abraham that He has brought Abraham from Ur of the Chaldeans to give him "this land" to possess. However, earlier in Gen. 12:1-3, God simply told him to "go to" the land which He will show Abraham, and God did not promise to give any land to Abraham. Now, in Gen. 15:7, God says that his intention to take Abraham from Ur is to give Abraham "this

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[373]Scholars such as Diana Edelman and M. Weinfeld regard the land as a "grant". Diana Edelman says, "Here [Gen. 12:1-3], the land is not presented as one of the divine promises made; rather, it is part of the initial command made to Abram, compliance with which will, by implication, result in the granting of the promises of becoming a great nation and gaining personal renown, becoming an example known and cited among the nations of one who was blessed by a god." See Diana Edelman, "The Land Theme in Genesis" (Paper Presented at Lausanne-Manchester-Sheffield Colloquium on Law in the Bible; Sheffield, 2005), 2; Cf. M. Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," *JAOS* 90.2 (1970): 189.

land." As God did not initially mention his promise of giving a land to Abraham at the time of his departure, Abraham's motivation to follow God's command was not to possess the land that God will show him. The nature of God giving a land is closer to God's gift for Abraham's obedience to His command to leave.

Another difficulty in taking the land as God's blessing for Abraham is that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have not actually possessed the land God has promised to give. They even failed to settle down there. Although the book of Genesis emphasises the land theme and repeats that God will give the land to Abraham and his descendants, none of them has actually come to possess the entire land. They have lived there as wandering aliens rather than the actual owners or settlers of the land in the narrative context. According to Genesis 23, Abraham bought the field and cave of Machpelah but it is not reasonable to take this as Abraham possessing the land that God told him to give. Although God promised to give the land where Abraham was sojourning, Abraham bought the portion of this land with his own means. Jacob also bought from the sons of Hamor the piece of Shechem where he has pitched his tent (cf. Gen. 33:18-19). Therefore, Abraham has been told that a land will be given to him and his descendants, but what Abraham and Jacob gained was only the field and cave of Machpelah and the small portion of Shechem. In Gen. 35:9-15, when God appears to Jacob after his journey from Paddan-aram to Bethel, God (Elohim) blesses Jacob, changes his name to Israel, and reaffirms that nations and kings will come from him and that He will give the land which He has given to Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 35:12). However, there is in fact no land given to Abraham or Isaac at this point of the storytelling. Unless the land given to Abraham or Isaac means the field and cave of Machpelah, God's statement that He has given the land to Abraham and Isaac

is at odds with the previous narrative.[374] Gen. 37:1 also confirms that Jacob settled in the land where his father Isaac had lived as an alien, which highlights that Isaac never received any portion of the land. For example, Isaac stayed in places such as Gerar and Beersheba, but he was an alien there (cf. Genesis 26). Therefore, it is hard to believe that the land was given by God and it becomes part of God's blessing for Abraham. God intended to give the land to Abraham and his descendants, but somehow this promise is deferred and does not come to fulfilment in the lifetime of the patriarchs.

For the above reason, it is hard to accept the scholarly position that the book of Genesis is ideologically meant for the descendants of Abraham to reclaim their land.[375] As only two portions of the land were bought in a legal transaction by their ancestors (cf. Genesis 23; Gen. 33:19-20), it is unreasonable to reclaim the land as theirs. After all, the promise of the land is not fulfilled within the book of Genesis. It should have been received as a free gift of God as a compensation for obedience to God. However, all of the patriarchs failed to meet this requirement. The land was not to be gained through purchase but must be given as a gift. Therefore, the scholarly position to take the land theme in Genesis as naturally referring to the reappropriation of the land after the return of exile is not convincing.

Secondly, the boundary of the land is not clear. The boundary of the land is idealistic rather than realistic in the book of Genesis. The scope of the land is often described as "this land", but its boundary changes as the narrative

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[374]Diana Edelman, "The Land Theme in Genesis," 9.

[375]Diana Edelman, "The Land Theme in Genesis," 14. Edelman objects to the arguments of Joseph Blenkinsopp and E. Theodore Mullen, Jr. Cf. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 103; E. Theodore Mullen Jr., *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations: A New Approach to the Formation* (SBL Semeia Studies; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 145. n.64.

develops. In Gen. 12:6-7, when Abraham was passing through the land near Shechem, God told Abraham that He will give "this land" to his descendants. As Abraham was passing through the area near Shechem, "this land" appears to be Shechem where Abraham has built an altar, but its boundary continues to change as the story goes on. When Abraham finally separated himself from Lot as God initially commanded (cf. Gen. 12:1),[376] God tells Abraham that He will give the land which Abraham is able to see from where he stands near Jordan valley: northward, southward, eastward, and westward (Gen. 13:14-17). Except for the Jordan valley where Lot has chosen to sojourn, the boundary of the land includes a wider area compared to the previous boundary limited near Shechem. On the day God made a covenant with Abram (cf. Gen. 15:18-21), God tells Abraham that he will give the land to his descendants. The boundary of the land here has even expanded further from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, which covers the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites (Gen. 15:18-21). This boundary of the land is not attested elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. As shown by the above references, the boundary of the land in the book of Genesis is not coherent.

Besides the ambiguity of the land theme in relation to the blessing of Abraham, there is another problematic feature in this blessing. The blessing of Abraham that Jacob is expected to receive may sound wonderful. When its contents and fulfilment are examined in the plot development, however, this blessing of Abraham, like the unfulfilled promise of the land, is not fulfilled in the lifetime of the patriarchs and thus becomes nothing but an illusion. The blessing of Abraham ("Blessing for Jacob III"), which is mentioned in Isaac's

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[376]Abraham should have left Lot behind according to God's command in Gen. 12:1.

second blessing for Jacob ("Blessing for Jacob II"), is not better than Isaac's blessing for Esau. The initial blessing given to Abraham by God (Gen. 12:1-3) was that He will make the name of Abraham great, make him a great nation, and that all the families of the earth will be blessed by Abraham. Reading the Abraham narrative, however, does not clearly show readers either the great name or the great nation of Abraham among other people. No nation or family has been blessed by Abraham. In Gen. 12:1-3, God promised Abraham that He will make of him a great nation, but Abraham ends up having only one son left by the end of the story. This is hardly progress. God also told Abraham that he will be a blessing (Gen. 12:2),[377] but it is clear that what Abraham does in the Abraham narrative is far from being a blessing to anyone. As Abraham risked Sarah's life twice in Egypt and Gerar by giving her as a wife to foreign rulers, he is certainly not a blessing to his wife. What mattered for Abraham was just to save his own life (cf. Gen. 12:13).[378]

Certainly, Abraham does not become a blessing to any nation. By defeating many kings from the places such as Shinar, Ellasar, and Elam (Genesis 14), what Abraham brings to these nations is not blessing but destruction. When Abraham pleaded to God over God's plan to destroy Sodom (Gen. 18:16-33), we need to note that what Abraham was concerned with was the safety of his nephew Lot and his family, not the salvation of Sodom. In the incident of Lot's captivity, we have already seen that Abraham took a risk to rescue Lot (cf. Gen. 14:8-16). The plea to save Sodom is just a means to save his nephew. After all, Sodom ends up being destroyed while Lot's life was spared. Even if we assume that Abraham's intention in pleading with God concerning Sodom was to care about people in Sodom and bless that nation,

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[377]The translation of "וְהְיֵה בְּרָכָה" in Gen. 12:2d can be rendered as "Be a blessing!". Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 50; Turner, *Genesis*, 53–5; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 150.

[378]Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 105.

Abraham could not help but see Sodom destroyed.[379] Furthermore, Abraham's attitude toward the nations, particularly the Canaanites, is not a favourable one, as shown by his prejudice against the Canaanites when it comes to choosing a marriage partner (Gen. 24:3).[380] It is hard to believe that a person who maintains such distance from these nations could be a blessing to them.

God told Abraham that He will bless Abraham, but it is hard to believe that God had actually blessed Abraham as he promised. At the end of Abraham's story, Gen. 24:1 reads that "Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years; and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things." However, it is hard to take this statement as it stands. As Laurence A. Turner suggests, it may be true that God allowed Abraham general material prosperity and thus God blessed Abraham in this sense, but other promises mentioned in Gen. 12:1-3 such as land, nation, and blessing are not fulfilled.[381] Turner comments:

> In 24.35f. Abraham's servant spells out exactly *in what sense* Abraham has been blessed — material prosperity and a son in his old age. This obviously falls far short of a complete fulfilment of 12.1-3 as it has now been defined. As yet, there is no great nation nor any real possession of the land. While it shows that Yahweh can bless to some degree a less than blameless (*tāmîm*) man, it is also eloquent testimony to the failure of the divine promises of 12.1-3 to materialize in any real way during Abraham's life time.

As Turner points out, God's promises in Gen. 12:1-3 do not come to a fulfilment. *The blessing of Abraham* is a deferred blessing. This blessing may carry on to Abraham's descendants and the history of Israel, but in many aspects the blessing of Abraham ("Blessing for Jacob III") does not become effective in the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The blessing given to Esau

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[379]Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 109.

[380]Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 110.

[381]Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 114.

is a more effective blessing than the blessing of Abraham in the lifetime of the recipient.

Thus far, I have discussed the problematic nature of the blessing of Abraham. Now, it is appropriate to discuss whether or not the blessing of Abraham is intrinsically different from Isaac's blessings for Jacob or Esau. Several scholars have reflected on this issue. For example, Devora Steinmetz suggests that the blessing which Esau loses and which Jacob steals is not the blessing of the paternal heritage.[382] Steinmetz states that this blessing is "more like a personal gift rather than a transmission of the family destiny."[383] She differentiates Isaac's first blessing for Jacob from his second blessing (blessing Isaac has given to Jacob before he sends Jacob to Paddan-aram; cf. Gen. 28:2-4) and assumes that Isaac's second blessing for Jacob ("Blessing for Jacob II") is a real or better blessing. However, she does not differentiate the blessing of Abraham from Isaac's second blessing for Jacob. Steinmetz seems to believe that the blessing of Abraham is included in Isaac's second blessing for Jacob. While Isaac mentions the blessing of Abraham in his second blessing for Jacob, it does not mean that the blessing of Abraham was given to Jacob at this point. Isaac's second blessing only includes Isaac's *wish* for Jacob to inherit the blessing of Abraham. When and how Jacob will receive this blessing of Abraham is not mentioned in Isaac's second blessing for Jacob. Although I have clearly distinguished the blessing of Abraham ("Blessing for Jacob III") from Isaac's second blessing for Jacob ("Blessing for Jacob II"), this distinction is not clear in Steinmetz's explanation.

The scene where Jacob meets Esau again and gives a gift to Esau offers another clue to understand whether the blessing of Abraham is different from

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[382]Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 98.

[383]Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 40.

other blessings in the Esau-Jacob narrative. When Jacob meets Esau again, Jacob returns a blessing to Esau. Gen. 33:11 literally reads: "please, take בִּרְכָתִי, *my blessing*, which has been brought to you." Earlier in Gen. 33:10, Jacob asked Esau to take his מִנְחָה , *gift* , but later in Gen. 33:11 Jacob asks Esau again to take his בִּרְכָה , *blessing*. John E. Hartley interprets that by referring to the gifts as a "blessing" Jacob made Esau aware that accepting these gifts means to take compensation for Jacob's having stolen Isaac's blessing (Gen. 27:27-29).[384] If one takes Gen. 33:11 literally, however, it could also indicate that Jacob is actually attempting to return a blessing to Esau. The questions here regard which blessing Jacob is returning and why.

Devora Steinmetz thinks that Jacob is returning the blessing stolen from Esau (the blessing in Gen. 27:28-29). Steinmetz suggests that Jacob can return the blessing which he has stolen from Esau because this is not a significant blessing.[385] According to Steinmetz, Isaac has given Jacob a *different* blessing before he left for Paddan-aram (cf. Gen. 28:1-5). She further points out that this blessing has been confirmed by the "man" in Genesis 32 and will be further confirmed by God.[386] Although it is not clearly stated in Steinmetz' explanation, her underlying assumption seems to me that Isaac's second blessing, including the blessing of Abraham mentioned in it, is a *better blessing* than Isaac's first blessing. Jan P. Fokkelman also suggests that God confirms Isaac's second blessing for Jacob, not the blessing Isaac intended for

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[384]Hartley, *Genesis*, 289 Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 230.

[385]Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 111; See also Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 182. n.53.

[386]Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 111; Cf. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 234. Fokkelman comments, "God's words to Jacob in 28.13ff had not been called a "blessing". In 32.30 he does give a blessing, but the contents are not mentioned; but now Isaac's wish of 28.3a has been fulfilled explicitly and definitively. What strikes us is what God does not confirm: the blessing to the first-born. The blessing of Isaac has, symbolically, been returned to Esau in 33.11."

the firstborn.[387] As Steinmetz and Fokkelman suggest, is Isaac's second blessing for Jacob the one and only blessing confirmed by God? Is the blessing of Abraham or Isaac's second blessing for Jacob intrinsically different from Isaac's first blessing for Jacob? Is Isaac's first blessing for Jacob less important than Isaac's second blessing for him?

Contrary to Steinmetz' and Fokkelman's assumption, there is nothing in the text which can suggest that God has confirmed either Isaac's first blessing for Jacob or his second blessing for Jacob. There is also no evidence to support the idea that the blessing of Abraham is superior to other blessings such as Isaac's first and second blessings for Jacob or Isaac's blessing for Esau. Steinmetz assumes that Jacob can return the blessing because it is not significant, but it is also not clear from the text that Jacob ever knew which blessing is significant or not. It is hard to believe that Jacob knew which blessing is better and thus could return a less important blessing to Esau among many blessings he has received. It seems to be more likely that Jacob has given a blessing to Esau as means of apologising or he has returned it because he realises that the blessing he has stolen has not been working in his life at all. However, the questions of which blessing Jacob returns and the reason why he returns it can be only speculated about — not resolved. Whether the blessing Jacob gives to Esau is the same blessing that he has stolen is not clear. Furthermore, whether a blessing is something that we can steal and return is still questionable. As Jacob thought that the right of the firstborn is something buyable with a bowl of lentil stew, it may not be surprising when Jacob believes that he could return the blessing to Esau.

Within the Esau-Jacob narrative, the blessing of Abraham ("Blessing for Jacob III") may not be the same kind of blessing compared with Isaac's

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[387]Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 234.

first blessing for Jacob (Gen. 27:27-29) or Isaac's blessing for Esau (Gen. 27:39-40). However, taking this blessing as a superior and real blessing (e.g. Steinmetz and Fokkelman) shows the scholarly tendency to distinguish Jacob the chosen one from Esau the forsaken one. Their underlying assumption seems to be that the chosen one must receive a better blessing.

Jacob is a character who is obsessed with blessings. However, the fact that he receives many blessings does not guarantee that he has received a superior blessing to Esau. It rather could weaken the significance of receiving blessings due to frequent repetitions. The blessing, particularly a blessing related to one's destiny, is often bestowed only once as manifested by Jacob's blessings for his twelve sons (cf. Genesis 49). The fact that Jacob receives blessings many times may strengthen the blessing given to him, but the same fact that one person receives blessings again and again also gives an impression that the former blessing is not enough (or properly working). One brief blessing could be better than several long blessings in terms of coherence. If one blessing is enough, why would it be necessary to receive blessings again and again?

I have elaborated that the blessing theme is very complex and that it is hard to figure out any systematic pattern within the Esau-Jacob narrative. Isaac, as a character, also does not understand clearly the nature of blessing and how to bestow it properly as a father. When Isaac realised that the blessing he intended to give to Esau was stolen by Jacob (cf. Gen. 27:33), he showed an understanding that a blessing cannot be revoked and there is no more blessing to give to Esau. However, he blessed Esau anyway and this blessing is likely to be a blessing that he intended to give to Jacob if he had blessings in mind for each of his sons. The fact that Isaac blesses Jacob again demonstrates that his previous knowledge that there is only one blessing for each son changed later.

Isaac mentions the blessing of Abraham in his second blessing for Jacob ("Blessing for Jacob II"), but the nature of the blessing of Abraham is not clearly described within the narrative and ironically we have no account of whether Abraham ever bestowed any blessing to Isaac. It is doubtful whether Isaac himself has ever received the blessing of Abraham from Abraham if this blessing must be transferred from generation to generation. The question we need to think over is: if Isaac himself has not received the blessing of Abraham, how could he possibly transfer this blessing of Abraham to Jacob? Steinmetz believes that Isaac's second blessing is a blessing of paternal heritage, but the subsequent narrative does not show any transference of paternal heritage by giving a certain blessing to next generation. Jacob blesses each of his twelve sons, but none of his words for them actually includes the expression *the blessing of Abraham.* We have no idea who among Jacob's sons received the blessing of Abraham. Neither Jacob's favourite son Joseph nor Judah, the founding father of the nation of Judah, is clearly mentioned to be a receiver of the blessing of Abraham. Where then did it go? The theme of "the blessing of Abraham" is present throughout the patriarchal narrative, but it is untenable to insist that the blessing of Abraham, which is not clearly defined and fulfilled within the narrative, is intrinsically superior to other blessings. The blessing of Abraham may be a different kind of blessing as I have also differentiated it from other blessings, but it is not a real blessing which is better than other blessings. There are just different kinds of blessings in the patriarch narrative. No blessing can be regarded as superior to other blessings.

Comparison with the Blessing for Jacob IV (Gen. 28:13-15) and the Blessing for Jacob VI (Gen. 35:9-12)

> ***(Blessing for Jacob IV)*** *I am the Lord the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. Your descendants shall also be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And behold, I am with you and keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until what I have done what I have promised you (Gen. 28:13-15 NASB).*

> ***(Blessing for Jacob VI)*** *God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddanaram, and blessed him. And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So his name was called Israel. And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation of a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you. The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you" (Gen. 35:9-12 RSV).*

When Jacob departed from Beersheba in fear of Esau's revenge and was going toward Haran, he lay down in a certain place which he later names Bethel and had a dream there (Gen. 28:10-11). In his dream, Jacob saw a ladder set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven, angels ascending and descending on it, and the Lord standing above it (Gen. 28:12-13).[388] What God

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[388]Instead of the traditional rendering of סֻלָּם as a "ladder", E. A. Speiser takes סֻלָּם as a *stairway*. Speiser comments, "The traditional "ladder" is such an old favorite that it is a pity to have to dislodge it. Yet it goes without saying that a picture of angels going up and down in a steady stream is hard to reconcile with an ordinary ladder. Etymologically, the term (stem *sll* "to heap up, raise") suggests a ramp or a solid stairway. And archaeologically, the Mesopotamian ziggurats were equipped with flights of stairs leading up to the summit; a good illustration is the excavated ziggurat of Ur (Third Dynasty). Only such stairway can account for Jacob's later description of it as a 'gateway to heaven' (17)." See Speiser, *Genesis*, 218.

says to Jacob in his dream are comforting words for Jacob but it may not sound fair to all readers. What will readers expect God to say to Jacob in his dream? Will it be a word of rebuke or a word of encouragement? At the time, Jacob was fleeing from Esau's possible threat. However, Jacob may deserve this because of what he has done to his father and brother. Some readers may expect that God would encourage Jacob in a time when Jacob has been in deep stress and he is in the centre of uncertainty. On the contrary, other readers may also expect that God would formulate what Jacob has done wrong, saying that Jacob should have not attempted to gain a blessing through a means of deceit. Although the context of Jacob's dream is immediately after he has stolen the blessing by deceit, God (Yahweh) surprisingly does not rebuke Jacob for what he has done to his father and his older brother. God says no word of rebuke against Jacob. Instead, God announces to Jacob a series of unconditional promises and blessings.

Compared to His dealings with previous wrong-doers in the Genesis narrative, God shows much more generosity toward Jacob. Concerning this passage, Victor P. Hamilton points out that Jacob, along with Isaac and Abraham, are "free from censure by God for patently scandalous behavior."[389] Hamilton comments:

> What does Yahweh say when he does speak? Perhaps surprisingly to the reader, he does not say one word to rebuke Jacob for his behavior toward his father and brother. . . This absence of rebuke contrasts vividly with the primeval stories where Adam and Eve, Cain, Noah's contemporaries, and the tower builders enjoy no such exemption. On the contrary, the hand of divine judgment falls on them heavily. In the patriarchal stories it is non-Hebrews (the pharaohs and the Abimelechs) who unsuspectingly took patriarchal wives as their own who pay a heavy price for unethical acts.

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[389]Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 241.

As Hamilton points out, the absence of rebuke regarding Jacob's wrong deeds contrasts with previous wrong doers, and it is hard to understand why God does not rebuke Jacob for his wrong deeds. It may be because God has favoured Jacob or He intended to let Jacob pay the price later.

In God's announcement to Jacob in his dream, He first reveals who He is and then gives Jacob several promises. God (Yahweh) reveals himself to Jacob as *the God of his grandfather and the God of his father*, which means that He has been the God of Abraham and Isaac for the second generation. Jacob now meets God as the third generation. God promises Jacob a land, numerous descendants, and blessing to all the families of the earth through both Jacob and his descendants. In spite of Jacob's wrong deeds, God declares that Jacob and his descendants will be a gateway for blessing to the world. Despite the fact that Jacob has been obsessed with gaining blessing through unfair means, God here assures Jacob that he will be a blessing to others.[390] Nevertheless, Jacob does not escape from his obsession with getting more blessings as manifested later in his request of blessing from the mysterious man at the Jabbok (cf. Gen. 32:26; MT 32:27).

God's announcement in Jacob's dream can be understood as a blessing given to Jacob ("Blessing for Jacob IV"). Although God does not directly bless Jacob in his dream, He promised that Jacob will mediate blessing to all the families of the earth and thus a blessing is implied in God's words for Jacob. The "blessing for Jacob IV" is, in its nature, a mixture of the blessing of Abraham in Gen. 12:1-3 and Isaac's understanding of the blessing of Abraham in Gen. 28:1-4. Like Isaac's understanding of the blessing of Abraham, the

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[390]Victor P. Hamilton comments, "Thus far in the Jacob story the emphasis has been on Jacob's "getting" the blessing. Here the emphasis shifts to 'being' the blessing. *berāḵā* is not something to be sought at all costs. It is, rather, something to be bestowed. This is the fifth text in Genesis (cf. 12:3; 18;18; 22:18; 26:4) to refer to a patriarch (and/or his offspring) as the means of worldwide blessing." See Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 242.

"blessing for Jacob IV" promises a land and numerous descendants. As it also promises Jacob being the gateway to the worldwide blessing, it is also similar to the blessing of Abraham implied in Gen. 12:1-3.

"The blessing for Jacob IV" is also similar to another blessing at Bethel later on in Jacob's life, which I named as the "blessing for Jacob VI." This was given to Jacob at Bethel after he has left Shechem[391] and arrived there. After wandering aimlessly for a long time, Jacob comes to return to Bethel. Bethel is a place where he has seen God in his dream and made a vow[392] before God at the time he was fleeing from Esau. Here, Jacob encounters God and receives a blessing again. Genesis commentators such as Gerhard Rad and Gordon J. Wenham have assumed that Jacob's return fulfils his former vow at Bethel,[393] but returning to Bethel is not good enough to fulfil his vow.[394] What Jacob previously vowed before God was to acknowledge God by means of setting up the house of God and offering a tithe (cf. Gen. 28:22). After returning to Bethel, Jacob built an altar and set up a pillar at Bethel but the narrative does not show any fulfilment of Jacob's offering a tithe.

The "blessing of Jacob VI" is often overestimated by Genesis commentators as a new blessing, renewed blessing, full blessing, or the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant.[395] For example, von Rad understands

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[391]Jacob left Shechem according to God's command (cf. Gen. 35:1), but it would be also not safe for him to stay in Shechem after Simeon and Levi have slaughtered Shechemite people.

[392]Jacob's vow, however, was closer to a deal. As he did with Esau his brother, Jacob here is a skillful dealmaker. This is nothing more than selfish request. Regarding Jacob's vow in Gen. 28:20-22, David W. Cotter comments, "Notice how Jacob's speech is full of 'I' and 'me.' Notice that there is no expression of remorse for the damage done to his family. Nor is there any fear of God. Jacob coolly cuts a deal to his own advantage. 'If God does thus and so for me, then I will acknowledge God.'" Cf. Cotter, *Genesis*, xxxiv.

[393]von Rad, *Genesis*, 337; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 323.

[394]Cf. Scullion, *Genesis*, 247.

[395]Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12–50: From Abraham to Joseph* (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1986), 149–50; von Rad, *Genesis*, 339; Waltke, *Genesis*, 469–70.

that the promise given to Abraham was completely renewed for Jacob in Genesis 35 as the promise given to Jacob here shows word-for-word the elements of the promise given to Abraham.[396] Similarly, Bruce K. Waltke points out that Isaac's blessing on Jacob in Gen. 28:2-3 is fulfilled in God's second appearance to Jacob at Bethel.[397] What is interesting in Waltke's analysis is that he relates God's two-time appearance to Jacob at Bethel to the Abrahamic covenant. Waltke insists that the first theophany at Bethel is similar to God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, and the second theophany at Bethel is similar to God's expanded covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17.[398] He points out that God (El), in both theophanies at Bethel, repeats "provisions of the Abrahamic covenant: fertility, nationhood, blessing to nations, and possession of Canaan."[399] According to Waltke, the theophany in Genesis 35 completes the revelation of the Abrahamic covenant to Jacob. To demonstrate the similarity between the second theophany to Jacob in Genesis 35 and God's expanded covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, he suggests the following examples:[400]

1) the same opening : "LORD/GOD appeared" (17:1; 35:9)
2) the same frame: God "appeared" and "went up"
(17:1; 35:9; 17:22; 35:13)
3) the same divine title: "God Almighty" (17:1; 35:11)
4) names changed: Abram to Abraham (17:5), Jacob to Israel (35:10).

Waltke's evidence for linking God's second appearance to Jacob at Bethel (cf. Genesis 35) with God's second covenant with Abraham in Genesis

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[396]von Rad, *Genesis*, 339.

[397]Waltke, *Genesis*, 469.

[398]Waltke, *Genesis*, 470.

[399]Waltke, *Genesis*, 469–70.

[400]Waltke, *Genesis*, 470.

17 are convincing, but I am not further convinced that Jacob comes to receive "the full blessings of the Abrahamic covenant" at Bethel.[401] It is far too sweeping to regard the later blessing given to Jacob at Bethel ("Blessing for Jacob VI") as bestowing the full blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. As Abrahamic covenant is not only applied to Abraham himself but to his descendants as manifested by Gen. 17:7, it is not absurd to relate the blessing given to Jacob at Bethel (Genesis 35) to the Abrahamic covenant. However, when God gave blessing to Jacob in both Bethel accounts, God never directly told Jacob to make a covenant with him. As the term בְּרִית , *covenant* was never used here, it is hard to take the second Bethel accounts as God making a covenant with Jacob. Listing promises does not mean making a covenant. As Waltke insisted, Genesis 35 surely recalls many earlier accounts but his attempt to take the blessing given to Jacob at Bethel (Genesis 35) as the full blessing of the Abrahamic covenant is untenable.

One way of understanding the similarity between the promise to Abraham and the promise to Jacob is to regard the promise as being transferred to or renewed in the next generation, but it is also possible to view this as being redundantly and meaninglessly repeated. I think that the blessing given to Jacob VI is neither a renewed blessing nor a fulfilment of a previous blessing. There is nothing new or special in this blessing. The elements such as land, fertility, and kings are already mentioned in previous blessings. It is a mixture of previous blessings and is simply repeated or assured by God. According to my understanding, the fact that Jacob receives the same kind of blessings again and again could give the impression that there is not much change in Jacob's character by receiving several blessings. Readers may expect that getting one more blessing could affect Jacob's inner self, but these

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[401] Waltke, *Genesis*, 475.

blessings are not meant to change any character of Jacob.[402] Like the blessing of Abraham, there are still not-yet aspects in these blessings for Jacob IV and VI. There is an enormous gap between what God promised for Jacob in both Bethel incidents and what is actually fulfilled in his life.

Comparison with Blessing for Jacob V (Gen. 32:29)

> ***(Blessing for Jacob V)*** *Then he [the mysterious man, hereafter MM] said, "Let me go the dawn is breaking." But he [Jacob] said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." So he [MM] said to him [Jacob], "What is your name?" And he [Jacob] said, "Jacob." And he [MM] said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please, tell me your name." But he [MM] said, "why is it that you ask my name?" And he [MM] blessed him [Jacob] there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, for [he said], "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved." (Gen. 32:26-30 NASB)*

Jacob's meeting with a mysterious man at the Jabbok (Gen. 32:22-32) is one of the most interesting and extensively interpreted texts in the book of Genesis. A number of ambiguities in this story open the possibility of various readings. As Jacob was anticipating meeting Esau before this scene, this story is certainly an unexpected incident for the readers who expected Jacob's reunion with Esau. This scene of Jacob's wresting match with the mysterious man shows Jacob getting another blessing which I have named as the "blessing

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[402]Bruce K. Waltke comments that Jacob is neither blessed nor a blessing at Shechem (Gen. 34:1-31) but he is blessed at Bethel and nations become part of the worshipping community. Cf. Waltke, *Genesis*, 471. However, it is simply Waltke's assumption that nations become part of the worshipping community. The narrator never directly says that nations joined the worshipping community. As the terror from God fell upon the cities, it just prevented them from chasing Jacob. Waltke's interpretation focusing on Jacob the patriarch seems to assume what is not told in the text. By borrowing Waltke's phrase, I insist that Jacob is neither blessed nor a blessing at Bethel.

for Jacob V". Taking advantage of the mysterious man's desire to leave before daybreak, Jacob refuses to let him go unless he blesses Jacob. Jacob's bold request here reminds readers of the earlier scene where he has used the need of Esau and bought the birthright from Esau. The trick that Jacob is using here is the same. For some reason, this mysterious opponent should leave before the daybreak,[403] and our tricky Jacob is not a person who will lose this golden opportunity. Just as he takes advantage of Esau's hunger, Jacob takes advantage of this mysterious man's weakness and succeeds in receiving the blessing.

Several Genesis commentators and scholars believe that the blessing of the mysterious man is a real or significant blessing which has certain power to empower or transform its recipient.[404] For example, John Hartley assumes that Jacob sought some vital and physical power which would enable him to prosper in Canaan or the power of destiny which would enable him to succeed in dealing with Esau. Hartley believes that this blessing empowered the promises to Abraham that Jacob mentioned in his prayer (cf. Gen. 32:12).[405] He also assumes that the blessing Jacob has taken by deceit becomes his by his honourable struggle with the mysterious man.[406] Thus, Hartley does not differentiate the blessing of mysterious man from the blessing that Jacob gained from Esau by deceit (Gen. 27:27-29). As previously discussed, Devora Steinmetz argued that Isaac's second blessing for Jacob before he sends Jacob to Paddan-aram is the real blessing and this blessing is confirmed by the

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[403]Jacob's wrestling with the mysterious man at the Jabbok recalls many tales in world literature of river-spirits or river demons who fight with human beings seeking to cross over the river. According to the river-demon myths, the power of the river demon is restricted to the duration of the night, thus losing the power after the daybreak. Cf. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 204.

[404]Hartley, *Genesis*, 284. Cf. Waltke, *Genesis*, 446; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 304.

[405]Hartley, *Genesis*, 284.

[406]Hartley, *Genesis*, 285.

mysterious man at the Jabbok.[407] Genesis commentators who love to read the Esau-Jacob story favouring Jacob tend to view this blessing as having transformed or empowered Jacob without considering what is really changed in Jacob.[408] For example, Gordon J. Wenham comments:

> Jacob is now a new man, Israel; his encounter with God has prepared him to meet Esau, as Jacob himself stresses by comparing Esau to God (vv 10-11). The new character of Israel is soon apparent. Courage replaces cowardice as Jacob himself strides ahead of his family to meet Esau (v 3). Humility takes the place of arrogance as he bows down seven times before his brother (v 3).[409]

However, gaining the blessing from the mysterious man has not changed Jacob at all. Several commentators such as David W. Cotter comment on his lack of transformation.[410] For example, Cotter comments:

> Maybe the point of the story of Jacob's wrestling is precisely that Jacob was not transformed, that he was a lame human being. He survived, to be sure, as he had survived so many adversities. And he is better than he was, also to be sure. But he never fully became Israel and always remained Jacob. And as Jacob, he was lame.[411]

However, as David Cotter admits, Cotter himself does not easily give up attempting to view Jacob as a model in line with the common trend of Genesis commentator's favourable view on Jacob. Let us look at how he finally interprets Jacob's experience favourably:

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[407]Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 111, 181. n.53.

[408]Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12–50*, 138, 140; W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 230; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 296, 304.

[409]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 304.

[410]See Cotter, *Genesis*, 248; Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 182; John C. L. Gibson, *Genesis: Volume 2* (The Daily Study Bible Series; Edinburgh: The Saint Andrews Press, 1982), 200; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 335. Hamilton comments, "The new name does not carry any guarantees that from this point on Jacob is transformed."

[411]Cotter, *Genesis*, 248.

> God needed to learn whether Jacob knew how lame he was, but Jacob did not. Jacob still thought that he was in charge, that he was in a position to make demands. So God made him visibly lame so that Jacob could never ignore that reality again. And God blessed him, because God—as hard as it may be for onlookers, wives, and children to understand—had chosen him for love. Read in this way, Jacob/Israel is more readily a model for us, his descendants in the biblical tradition, visibly lame as he was, only partially transformed (at best) as he was, but still blessed because chosen out of love—as he was. God remains a savior in this story but cannot make someone into a person he does not want to be.[412]

Cotter's view shows a typical trend to interpret the Jabbok incident theologically, and to read it as favourable to Jacob. Many Genesis commentators love to give significant theological meaning to the blessing given by the mysterious man. However, we need to note that this blessing does not change Jacob at all. Right after gaining this blessing, what Jacob did was to deceive his brother again by telling that he will come to Seir following after Esau, but he did not. He ended up settling in Succoth.[413] What is changed after this incident is only his name—from Jacob to Israel.

3. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have offered an alternative and favourable reading of the blessing given to Esau (Gen. 27:39-40) and also discussed the incomplete and deferred nature of blessings given to Jacob. Many Genesis commentators have understood the blessing given to Esau as a curse. The most favourable opinion about the blessing given to Esau is that Esau receives from Isaac a

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[412]Cotter, *Genesis*, 248.

[413]R. Christopher Heard suggests that Jacob's settlement in Succoth would be related to his disability caused by his wrestling with the mysterious man at Jabbok, rather than his deliberate intention to deceive Esau again. See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 132.

secondary blessing.[414] However, the distinction that Jacob receives a blessing and Esau receives a curse or at best a secondary blessing needs to be reconsidered. Despite the fact that Jacob steals Esau's blessing, Esau is still blessed in many aspects: with prosperity, land, and leadership. He is not only blessed materially. Although Jacob who has received various blessings did not transform that much, Esau shows amazing grace by forgiving his brother later on. Esau can be read favourably as a better role model than Jacob. Esau's forgiveness provides the means whereby Jacob ultimately experiences God's grace upon him.

Most Genesis commentators do not fairly interpret the blessing given to Esau compared with several blessings given to Jacob. Their assumption about Esau as a negative type has driven them to read the blessing given to Esau negatively, and on the contrary various blessings given to Jacob favourably. Our Genesis narrator, however, is also concerned about Esau. It is fairer to view Esau and Jacob as both having equally received different kinds of blessings. Jacob has received several blessings, but most of them do not work out in the life of Jacob and become deferred. The blessings given to Jacob contain several aspects which allow us to interpret them unfavourably, but Genesis commentators and scholars, who focus on Jacob in their reading, do not carefully consider these aspects, while they love to read the blessing given to Esau negatively. Thus, what I have done in this chapter is to reverse this perspective and to show an example of reading blessings given to Jacob unfavourably, in order to suggest a way to view blessings given to Esau and Jacob fairly.

What makes negative interpretations of Esau is often the assumptions of the interpreters. If a reader favours Jacob, he or she is likely to read the

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[414]Cf. Spina, "Esau: The Face of God," 20.

blessings given to Jacob favourably. Negative interpretations of the blessing given to Esau often originate from a reader's favouritism toward Jacob as a main character. As I have shown a favourable reading of Esau, it is not quite unreasonable to read the blessing given to Esau this way. The reading I have offered in regard to the blessing given to Esau (Gen. 27:39-40) is not the only reading, but it is certainly one possible reading.

Chapter 5
Return of Esau, Face of God (Genesis 32-33)

How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together.
(Ps. 133:1)

After Isaac sends Jacob to Paddan-aram, Esau fades from the story and the narrator goes on to relate Jacob's conflicted meeting with his uncle Laban (Gen. 28:10 to 31:54). What happens between Jacob's flight and his reunion with Esau serves to show the destiny of Jacob who has stolen his brother's blessing. Jacob the deceiver experiences deceit at the hands of Laban. Jacob learns that the younger is not always preferred to the elder (cf. Gen. 29:26). Instead of being served, Jacob has to serve Laban for his two daughters, Leah and Rachel (cf. Gen. 29:18, 25; 30:26; 31:41). His meeting with a mysterious man at the Jabbok ends with Jacob maimed and lame.

The present chapter discusses the portrayal of Esau in the context of the patriarchs in Genesis, primarily compared with Jacob. Esau lived among other patriarchs such as Isaac and Jacob, and to some extent Esau is a patriarchal figure like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The narrator portrays him as more appealing, humane, and honourable than any other patriarch, and in particular than Jacob. He becomes a leader of four hundred men even without God's promise of becoming a great nation, which no other patriarchs accomplished. Although Jacob has deceived Esau and stolen what belongs to Esau, Esau does not bear a permanent grudge against Jacob and does not take revenge against Jacob because of what Jacob has done to him. Instead, Esau welcomes his brother warmly after twenty years of separation. Negative presuppositions about Esau lead Genesis commentators and scholars to be skeptical about episodes such as Esau's warm welcome when Jacob meets

Esau again, but a close examination of the texts on Esau's reunion with Jacob shows that favourable characteristics are attributed to Esau.

In the following pages, I will discuss the patriarchal portrayal of Esau's character shown in Genesis 32 and 33, by examining the following: (1) Esau with four-hundred men, (2) Esau's lordship over Jacob, (3) Esau's forgiveness of Jacob, (4) the description of Esau's face as "God's face" by both Jacob and the narrator, and (5) the nature of the reunion between Esau and Jacob. Although Esau can be read as showing many positive and honourable characteristics in Genesis 32-33, many Genesis commentators and scholars hesitate to shine a spotlight on these characteristics.[415] It is precisely the main purpose of this chapter to highlight these characteristics to their maximum by criticising Genesis commentators' negative interpretation of Genesis 32 and 33. More than any other Esau texts in Genesis, the portrayal of Esau in Genesis 32 and 33 shows how favourable the depiction of the character of Esau is.

1. Esau, a Powerful Patriarch

After Jacob has fled from Esau and gone to Paddan-aram, Esau has been silent within the narrative until he meets Jacob again. In narrative time, it has been almost twenty years (cf. Gen. 31:41).[416] After the long silence of Esau, now readers come to encounter a new portrayal of Esau as a powerful patriarch, even a more powerful figure than Jacob. When Jacob left Laban and returned on the way home, Jacob sent his messengers to his brother Esau who is in the land of *Seir*, the field of *Edom*.[417] When Jacob's servants returned to

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[415]Supporting evidence will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

[416]Gen. 31:41 reads, "These twenty years I have been in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times" (RSV).

[417]The relationship between Seir and Edom will be discussed in chapter 6.

Jacob, the servants said to Jacob that Esau was coming to meet Jacob with *four hundred men* (Gen. 32:6).

Esau with Four Hundred Men

What does this portrayal of *Esau with four hundred men* signify? While Jacob has been a servant of Laban and become an alien in Paddan-aram, has Esau already made himself a leader of a nation? In regard to the reappearance of Esau with four hundred men, modern readers may not look at the number four hundred with much attention to it but four hundred men is not a small group in the patriarchal times. As I have discussed previously, four hundred men are even greater than Abraham's trained men when he rescued Lot. Abraham had three hundred and eighteen trained men at the time (cf. Gen. 14:14). The portrayal of Esau with four hundred men gives a clue that Esau should be perceived as a powerful patriarch. However, many commentators either do not give much attention to the significance of the four hundred men[418] or understand this negatively by taking them as a fighting force, raiding party, or militia.[419]

There is, of course, another question as to whether the text states unequivocally that there were really four hundred men with Esau. The number four hundred could be an exaggeration. It is Jacob's messengers who report

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[418]See Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 260–74; Robert Davidson, *Genesis 12–50* (The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 182–3, 190–1; Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 291–97; Hartley, *Genesis*, 280–90; Gibson, *Genesis*, 192–6; Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*, 127–9, 132–5; Kidner, *Genesis*, 168, 171; Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 542–3, 564–5; Speiser, *Genesis*, 254–61; Towner, *Genesis*, 229–32; Turner, *Genesis*, 138–9, 144–6; John T. Willis, *Genesis* (The Living Word Commentary; Abilene: ACU Press, 1979), 356, 359–60.

[419]For example, Robert Alter comments, ". . . the rapid approach with four hundred men looks ominous, especially since that is a standard number for a regiment or raiding party, as several military episodes in 1 and 2 Samuel indicate." Similarly, Joyce G. Baldwin says, "Esau mustered his armed men and was on his way to attach his brother, so precipitating the greatest crisis of Jacob's life." Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 178; Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12–50*, 135; Sarna, *Genesis*, 224, 229; Waltke, *Genesis*, 442; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 507.

that Esau is with four hundred men, but it is unlikely that they have actually taken time to count exactly. R. Christopher Heard suggests that when four hundred men appear in Gen. 33:1, הִנֵּה (*hinneh*, "behold") may indicate that "in the subsequent phrase the narrator describes things as they seem to Jacob (who has already been led to expect four hundred men) are not necessarily as they really are (for this use of *hinneh*, see Steinberg, 1985:243; Bar-Efrat: 35)."[420] However, even if Jacob has regarded Esau's entourage as four hundred because of his prior knowledge given by the messengers, we need to note that Jacob's messengers, through the narrator's viewpoint, have regarded Esau's men as four hundred. This is probably a round number, but it signifies at least the great number of Esau's retainers. Applying the use of הִנֵּה is not relevant to explain the significance of the number four hundred. Even if Jacob's messengers may have not taken time to make an exact count, the number four hundred as a round number has frightened Jacob's messengers and Jacob.

How then should we interpret *Esau with four hundred men?* Many Genesis commentators and scholars do not interpret Esau with four hundred men in a positive way.[421] For example, Joyce G. Baldwin assumes that Esau's four hundred men are armed.[422] Claus Westermann comments that Esau's approach with four hundred men portrays Esau as the *leader of a mercenary army* and it shows the picture of what Gen. 27:40 says, "you shall live by your sword."[423] However, the text never confirms that Esau's four hundred men are armed. Westermann's comment on Esau with four hundred men is clearly an overinterpretation. We as readers have no clue that Esau is involved in a

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[420]See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 128.

[421]See Alter, *Genesis*, 178; Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12–50*, 135; Sarna, *Genesis*, 224, 229; Waltke, *Genesis*, 442; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 507.

[422]Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12–50*, 135.

[423]See Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 507.

mercenary army. Westermann seems to assume that Esau's four hundred men are bearing swords and thus fulfil the prediction that Esau will live by the sword,[424] but the narrator never tells us that Esau or his men approached Jacob with a sword or any other weapon. Even so, there is a negative scholarly assumption that Esau and his four hundred men are approaching Jacob in an *aggressive* manner.[425] For example, Peter Lockwood assumes this. Lockwood comments that Esau is eager to lay hands on Jacob when he hears Jacob is on the way home.[426] This interpretation, however, does not have strong support from the text. The verb בוא , which is used to describe Esau's movement, has a meaning such as *to come in* or *to go*. This verb rarely connotes an aggressive movement such as *marching* in a military scene.[427]

Lockwood further insists that four hundred men elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible signify "a military detachment" (e.g. 1 Sam. 22:2; 1 Kgs. 22:6).[428] However, even if we take four hundred men as a military unit, the crucial point is how we will understand these four hundred men as a military unit—either in a negative or positive sense. Four hundred men are certainly a viable group for a local combat, but we need not necessarily suppose that Esau's four hundred men are meant as a military unit. Peter Lockwood's interpretation seems to be based on his misunderstanding of David with four

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[424]Westermann assumes that Esau's four hundred men bear swords by relating "Esau with four hundred men" to Isaac's prediction "you shall live by your sword." See Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 507. However, the biblical references to David with four hundred men (1 Sam. 22:2; 25:3) shows counter evidence to Westermann's supposition. For further discussion, see pages 192 to 193 of the present study.

[425]See Alter, *Genesis*, 178; Peter F. Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War: The 'Reconciliation' of Jacob and Esau (Genesis 33)," *LTJ* 31 (1997): 4; Sarna, *Genesis*, 229.

[426]Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 4.

[427]The Hebrew term such as צָעַד is a more specific word to describe a motion of marching.

[428]Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 4 Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 224; Waltke, *Genesis*, 442.

hundred men and his bias against Esau as a negative character. In 1 Sam. 22:2, when David departed from Achish the king of Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam, the four hundred men who gathered to David were his brothers, all his father's house, and people who were in distress, debt, or discontented. David became a captain over them, but this group was not initially intended and organised as a professional military unit. They were gathered to David, probably to encourage the fugitive from Saul and offer him help.

It is only later that David's four hundred men participate in combat with the Philistines at Keilah (1 Sam. 23:1-5). At first, David's four hundred men did not want to fight against the Philistines because they felt vulnerable even in Judah, hiding from Saul's army. David's four hundred men were initially more like an entourage to protect David from Saul's attack rather than a professionally trained military unit.

We also need to note that the word חֶרֶב , *sword*, or any military weapon is not mentioned in this scene of the battle with the Philistines. Later in 1 Sam. 25:13, each of David's men girds on his sword but this girding on one's sword was not for a full-scale battle. This incident occurred through David's petty grudge against Nabal the Calebite. By the time he leaves Keilah, David had six hundred men. After a year and four months of living in the country of the Philistines, David's men make raids on the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites near Shur and the land of Egypt (1 Sam. 27:7-8). However, we do not need to equate the later portrayal of David's men as raiders with Esau's four hundred men. It is also wrong to assume that Esau's four hundred men are bearing swords like David's four hundred men.

Lockwood's other evidence is also not appropriate. In 1 Kgs 22:6, four hundred men are not a military detachment. They are just a group of prophets which number four hundred. As I have discussed above, four hundred men can

be interpreted as a viable group for a military unit, but it does not necessarily mean that they are a professionally trained army. Understanding Esau with four hundred men simply as a military unit is a hasty decision. Esau's four hundred men are more likely a group of people who travel with an important leader Esau. Powerful figures in the Hebrew Bible such as the queen of Sheba had brought their own entourage when they visit another country.[429] Thus, Esau's four hundred men do not need to be interpreted negatively as a sign of Esau having any aggressive intent against his brother. Their presence rather shows a positive portrayal of Esau as a powerful patriarch or a great leader. Intertextually, Esau's four hundred men show another likeness to David with four hundred men. Previously in chapter two, I have pointed out that Esau is intertextually associated with the heroic character David who is also portrayed as red like Esau. Like David, he was able to gather four hundred men and become their leader.

The fact that Esau can muster four hundred men shows that Esau has already become a leader of a prosperous גוי (*people* or *nation*). One may object to this idea by pointing out that the number four hundred may not be enough number to be considered a גוי. However, the number four hundred signifies that Esau's group is not simply a family group.[430] Esau's four hundred men were living near a particular area called the land of Seir under Esau's leadership.[431] Besides, the number four hundred is simply what Esau has brought as his entourage. The number of Esau's people could be more than four hundred men. What is remarkable here is that Esau, who has not received

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[429]Cf. 1 Sam. 10:2; 2 Chr. 9:1.

[430]The number four hundred clearly exceeds the number of Esau's wives, sons, and grandchildren described by Esau's genealogy in Genesis 36.

[431]It is possible that not all four hundred men are from Seir, but they must have been living near Seir, given that Esau could collect them as a group.

a promise of nationhood,[432] becomes a leader of such group which outnumbers the men of the patriarchs.[433] Compared with Jacob, the number of people in Jacob's group when they came to Egypt did not even exceed seventy (cf. Exod. 1:1-5).[434] We have no account of whether Jacob ever had as many followers as Esau except his family members.

Jacob's Interpretation of Four Hundred Men

Although Esau with four hundred men does not necessarily imply his aggressive attitude toward Jacob, there is still another question to resolve: If Esau's attitude toward Jacob is not hostile, why is Esau accompanied by so many men? Many Genesis commentators do not ponder upon this question seriously and often accept what Jacob assumed: *Esau's four hundred men are a fighting force and Esau is going to do harm to Jacob.*[435] For example, J. Gerald Janzen calls Esau's four hundred men a "virtual army" or an "armed band".[436] Hermann Gunkel understands that Esau's hostile attitude toward Jacob becomes relieved by Jacob's beautiful speeches and gifts.[437] John Skinner also does not exclude the possibility that Esau and his four hundred men intended to do harm to Jacob but Jacob tamed Esau's ferocity.[438] Jacob

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[432]Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael and Jacob have received such promise of nationhood (cf. Gen. 12:2; 13:6; 15:5; 22:17 [Abraham]; Gen. 26:4, 24 [Isaac]; Gen. 17:20; 21:13, 19 [Ishmael]; Gen. 28:14; 35:11 [Jacob]).

[433]The number of Abraham's trained men was 318 when he rescued his nephew Lot in Sodom (cf. Gen. 14:14). Inferred from the fact that Jacob feared when his brother was approaching with four hundred men, Jacob's men must be fewer than Esau's men (cf. Genesis 32). The members of Jacob's family were 70 when he went down to Egypt (Gen. 46:27).

[434]According to Gen. 46:26, Jacob's family numbers only sixty-six at the time Jacob's family migrates to Egypt (though this number does not include women and servants).

[435]Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 178; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 322; Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*, 127; Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born*, 100; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 507.

[436]See Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*, 127, 132.

[437]Gunkel, *Genesis*, 354.

[438]Skinner, *Genesis*, 412.

assumes that Esau along with four hundred men are not friendly to him and he becomes more afraid of Esau. We can, however, make the opposite deduction as to why Esau is accompanied by so many men.

First, it may be for purpose of protecting Esau himself from any threat during his journey to meet his brother. It could be dangerous for Esau to travel a long journey from Seir to Mahanaim alone to meet Jacob. There could be an attack from various nomadic groups or even brigands. He, as an important leader who is able to control four hundred men, needs to be protected. Four hundred men could be the least needed for this purpose.[439]

Secondly, as a great leader of the Edomites, he might want to show himself as a kingly figure wherever he goes or it may be a customary action for a politically important person. Esau as an important figure is entitled to an escort of four-hundred men. This is not necessarily meant to scare or threaten his brother Jacob. When a politically important figure such as a President visits another country for diplomatic purposes today, the President is customarily accompanied by his/her entourage or diplomatic teams for his/her trip. The biblical texts also have a record of a politically important figure visiting another country with his or her entourage. When the queen of Sheba came to Jerusalem to test Solomon with difficult questions, she has come with a very large retinue (cf. 1 Kgs. 10:1; 1 Chr. 9:1). The reason why Esau brought his four hundred men to meet Jacob can be understood in light of this.

Although Esau's four hundred men do not necessarily signify a fighting force, Jacob's interpretation of them as such is based on vague reports from his messengers. Jacob's messengers here have failed to carry out their duties. Jacob wanted them to deliver his flocks to Esau along with his message that he

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[439]See how David's four hundred men feel vulnerable and afraid in Judah, hiding from Saul's army. They were also afraid of fighting against the army of the Philistines (cf. 1 Sam. 23:3).

hopes to find favour in Esau's sight. However, instead of giving or receiving any message from Esau, the messengers return and say to Jacob that his brother is coming to meet Jacob with four hundred men. There is no word from Esau.[440] It is obscure whether or not the messengers even said any word to Esau. It is more likely that the messengers have not even met Esau in person and therefore have not heard any word from Esau. They seem to be afraid of the sight of Esau coming toward them with four hundred men and fear being harmed. They ran away from Esau, neglecting their allotted task. Jacob's careful attitude and initial fear shown before he sends his messengers to Esau (cf. Gen. 32:4) may have affected his messengers so that they are already afraid of going to Esau. Jacob's reactions to his messenger's report such as dividing his camps into two groups (Gen. 32:7-8 [MT Gen. 32:8-9]) again shows how much he has been afraid of Esau. The whole story reveals Jacob's attitudes but says almost nothing about Esau's.

For readers, understanding why Esau is coming with four hundred men is a different matter. Not all readers will easily infer that Esau's accompanying four hundred men shows Esau's aggressive attitude toward Jacob. Gordon J. Wenham's question, "Is Esau coming to wage war or to receive his brother royally?",[441] proposes at least two possibilities: either attacking Jacob or greeting him respectfully. Wenham seems to be more inclined to take the latter option. Wenham points out, "If he [Esau] is planning an attack, why allow the messengers to return unharmed, allowing

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[440]Thus, Claus Westermann comments, "A comparison with Num. 13:28-30 shows that the achievement of the goal and the news of it were part of the form of the report of the messengers. But instead of an answer from Esau the messengers brings news that Esau is already on the way to meet Jacob with 400 men." See Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 507. Gordon J. Wenham also comments, "The messengers' return is eerie, for they bring no reply from Esau but simply report that he is on his way with four hundred men. The brevity makes for ambiguity." See Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 290.

[441]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 290.

Jacob to prepare himself? Or does Esau feel so superior that he is prolonging Jacob's agony before striking the final blow?"[442] Although Wenham raises a good question in the first part of the above question, it does not allow for the possibility that Jacob's messengers kept their distance from Esau's entourage and ran away before Esau captured them. Wenham's second question also contains some miscalculations. If Esau intended to give Jacob more agony, then he could capture and harm some of the messengers. As Hanun the Ammonite king humiliated David's servants by shaving off half of their beards and cutting off their garments in the middle (cf. 2 Sam. 10:1-4), Esau could have humiliated Jacob's servants if his intention toward Jacob was hostile. If Jacob's messengers returned and said to Jacob that "we went to your brother Esau but he slaughtered us and let only a few of us return to you, commanding to deliver a message that *you will be like one of your slaughtered messengers*," Jacob would be more frightened. If the messengers had really met Esau, what they are supposed to report to Jacob ought to be a word from Esau. Why would Esau let the messengers go without any word if Esau has really met them? It can be legitimately inferred that Jacob's messengers have not even met Esau. Therefore, Jacob's misinterpretation of Esau with four hundred men is caused by the failure of his coward messengers sent to him for the first time. Jacob's prior fear about Esau also leads to misunderstanding his brother's intention. Jacob quickly interprets Esau's four hundred men as a threat to his family.

While Jacob has regarded Esau's action as hostile to himself, the narrator does not explicitly mention Esau's intention or what these four

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[442]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 290.

hundred men are for.[443] The narrator never mentions whether Esau with four hundred men hold any weapon like a sword. Negative scholarly assumptions are not supported from the textual evidence. The narrator just brings out the tension for readers in the narrative. For readers who do not share Jacob's negative bias against Esau, Esau with four hundred men therefore will not give any negative impression of Esau.

2. Esau's Lordship Over Jacob

The first words that Jacob asked his servants to deliver to Esau on the way to meet Jacob is that *Jacob himself is Esau's servant.* Gen. 32:4 reads: *Thus says your servant Jacob, "I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now . . ."* (Gen. 32:4 NASB) Previously, in chapter two, I have argued that the divine oracle given to Rebekah (Gen. 25:23) could legitimately imply a prediction that *the lesser will serve the greater.* I have suggested that this oracle could imply that whoever the lesser is between Esau and Jacob (or between Edom and Israel), the lesser will serve the greater.[444] The divine oracle is like the law of the jungle: the weak become the victims of the strong. In his blessing for Esau, one may think that Isaac has predicted Esau serving his brother but the narrative never shows Esau's servanthood toward Jacob. Furthermore, the statement about Esau serving Jacob is also ambiguous in terms of defining the meaning of *to serve.* I have previously argued that serving someone within a family circle does not explicitly connote the concept

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[443]If Jacob had such a power of leading four hundred men, Jacob would be the one who may lay hands on Esau. Psychologically, Jacob the victimiser can be also inclined to get rid of Esau before Esau the victim pays back.

[444]See pages 69 to 72 of the present study.

of subjugation.[445] Serving Jacob in a servant to lord relationship does not happen physically for Esau. As we observe in this scene of Jacob's reunion with Esau, it is rather Jacob who calls himself a servant before Esau.

Whatever Jacob meant by his words "your servant Jacob"—either simply a way of respecting his brother Esau or humbling himself before Esau —, it is still remarkable that when Jacob meets Esau again, Jacob himself becomes humble, afraid of Esau, and thus does not hesitate to call Esau *my lord.* When Jacob bought Esau's birthright and stole his blessing, Jacob did not show any respect for his brother. Now Jacob's attitude toward his brother is completely different from his previous attitude. In regard to Jacob calling his brother a lord, Frank A. Spina points out that the prophecy of Jacob being lord over Esau is reversed, at least temporarily.[446] However, this scene actually portrays Esau's permanent lordship over Jacob, not a temporary lordship. According to the divine oracle (cf. Gen. 25:23), the lesser, whoever he is, is expected to serve the greater. By calling himself a servant before Esau, now Jacob shows readers that he is not the one that the divine oracle indicated as the greater.

Genesis commentators tended not to take Jacob's speech seriously and regard it as a typical form of address customary in the letters of that time.[447] Just as the contemporary usage of "Dear . . . " in writing of a letter does not

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[445]For example, when Jacob serves Laban (Gen. 29:30; 30:26, 29; 31:6), the nuance of "to serve" here is *to work.* With the presupposition ב, *for,* Jacob also served *for* Rachel and Leah (Gen. 29:18, 20, 25; 31:41) but the nuance here is again *to work.* Jacob has worked for Laban's family, but his service was not done because he is powerless and subjugated to them. Jacob's relationships to Laban, Rachel, and Leah is not such a relationship between a servant and a master. Jacob's role is like the servant before Laban and his two daughters, but this relationship is not something like a vassal serving a suzerain. See pages 141 to 142 of this work.

[446]Spina, "Esau: The Face of God," 24.

[447]See Alter, *Genesis,* 178; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50,* 321; Sarna, *Genesis,* 224; Speiser, *Genesis,* 254; Cf. Ignatius Hunt, *The World of the Patriarchs* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 44–5.

imply any particular intimacy between the one addressing and the one being addressed, they regard addressing someone as lord nothing other than the form of address at that time. However, even though this is a typical form of address in ancient times, what Jacob is doing before Esau means more than that. David W. Cotter interprets this as Jacob "voluntarily undoing the interpretation of God's ambiguous prenatal prediction (Gen. 25:23) on which he and his mother had based their deception, namely, that 'the elder should serve the younger.'"[448] It is not clear whether Jacob and Rebekah have based their deception on the divine oracle from the Esau-Jacob narrative because the text does not show the motives of their deception. However, regardless of Cotter's speculation here, I still agree with Cotter's suggestion that Jacob is undoing what the divine oracle predicted ambiguously.[449] The effect of Jacob's action to call Esau lord is undoing the traditional rendering of the last part of the divine oracle: the older will serve the younger. According to my alternative reading of the divine oracle, *the lesser will serve the greater*, we can also interpret Jacob's action from a different perspective. Jacob is not greater than Esau at all. To secure his and his family's safety, Jacob the lesser does not have any other choice than humbling himself as a servant to Esau. It is the way that the lesser can survive. It is Jacob who becomes the lesser within the narrative.

It is not only the divine oracle that Jacob is voluntarily undoing when he meets Esau again. Jacob is also undoing the blessing that he has stolen from Esau by deceit. Isaac predicted that the sons of your mother will bow down, but the one who bows down is Jacob, not Esau. As Jacob approaches, Esau comes to see a remarkable spectacle. Jacob voluntarily bows to the ground

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[448]Cotter, *Genesis*, 241.

[449]Cotter, *Genesis*, 242.

seven times (Gen. 33:3), and then his wives, concubines, and children all come before Esau and bow down (Gen. 33:6-7).

As with Jacob calling Esau as lord, Genesis commentators and scholars also do not take Jacob bowing down seven times before Esau seriously.[450] For example, Ignatius Hunt comments, "Thus in the Amarna letters, the governors begin their letters (often of request) to the Pharaoh: "Beneath the feet of the king, my lord, seven times, and seven times I fall . . . " or "At the two feet of the king, my lord, the Sun-god from heaven, seven times, seven times, I fall, both prone and supine" (*ANET* 483-485). These customs of the Near East are to some extent still in vogue and may be used as sincere marks of respect and esteem."[451] However, we need to note that the custom shown in this letter does not happen between brother and brother. It happens between one who has authority and the other who does not. The scene of Jacob bowing down seven times toward Esau is different from the above situation. Bowing down seven times may be regarded as marks of respect and esteem at the time, but Jacob within the narrative clearly intends more. Bowing down once would be sufficient to show respect for Esau, but Jacob bows down *seven* times, which is a normal way of a vassal showing his royalty before the king who conquered.[452] Jacob receives Esau as a king and acts like Esau's vassal. As a biblical number, the number seven symbolises completeness. Bowing down *seven times* also shows Jacob's *complete* deference to his brother.[453]

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[450]Alter, *Genesis*, 184; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 354; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 343; ; Speiser, *Genesis*, 259.

[451] See Hunt, *The World of the Patriarchs*, 44–5.

[452]Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 229. Sarna also suggests, "There is a measure of irony in the situation, for it is the exact reversal of the blessing that Jacob extracted from his father and that led to his flight from Esau's wrath: "Be master over your brothers, / And let your mother's sons bow to you" (27:29); Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 298. Although several scholars have pointed this out, they do not quite highlight its significance.

[453]Cf. Hartley, *Genesis*, 288.

The word מִנְחָה that Jacob has brought to Esau also needs further attention. Depending on context, מִנְחָה means "gift", "offering", or "tribute".[454] As David W. Cotter points out, the amount of flocks that Jacob sends and the repeated used of "lord" and "servant" language indicates that Jacob is presenting himself to Esau as "faithful vassal sending tribute to his overlord."[455] Jacob bowing down seven times cannot be regarded as a normal behaviour simply to respect his older brother. Jacob bowing down seven times before Esau needs to be understood as the fulfilment of the "blessing for Jacob I" (Gen. 27:27-29) which still works for Esau, although Jacob has stolen it: Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. As Isaac's blessing that he initially intended to give Esau (Gen. 27:27-29) predicts, Jacob now bows down to Esau. Even after Esau's warm reception of Jacob, Jacob still remains distant and formal before Esau, calling Esau "my lord", while Esau calls Jacob "my brother".[456] It is noteworthy that Esau calls Jacob "my brother" but Jacob never reciprocates. Jacob always refers to himself as Esau's servant. It is also noteworthy that Esau never corrects Jacob's words. It perhaps feels good for Esau to hear from Jacob that he is lord and Jacob is his servant.[457]

Blessings Crossed: Re-thinking the Power of Isaac's Blessings over Esau and Jacob

After discussing the ambiguous nature of the divine oracle (chapter two), the nature of Isaac's blessings given to Esau and Jacob (chapter four),

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[454]Brown, et al., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, #4503.

[455]Cotter, *Genesis*, 243. n.3.

[456]See Alter, *Genesis*, 185; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 345; von Rad, *Genesis*, 327–8; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 299; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 526.

[457]David W. Cotter suggests this. See Cotter, *Genesis*, 251. Alternatively, Esau may be a great listener.

and the portrayal of Esau as a lord over Jacob in this section, it seems appropriate for me to evaluate briefly here how the divine oracle and Isaac's blessing work over Esau in the Esau-Jacob narrative. The divine oracle and Isaac's blessings are key elements in understanding Esau's narrative role which has been often understood as showing his inferior or negative role in relation to Jacob. However, close attention to the way in which the narrator tells the story of Esau shows a completely different picture from this kind of scholarly assumption.

The fact that Jacob calls Esau his lord needs to be considered in light of Isaac's blessing for Esau (cf. Gen. 27:39-40). Previously, I have suggested an alternative and favourable reading of this blessing when it is applied to Esau. However, the development of the narrative plot also indicates that the blessing given to Esau (Gen. 27:39-40) has been working in the life of Jacob, not in the life of Esau. Even though Jacob has stolen the blessing intended for Esau (Gen. 27:27-29) which Isaac thought he was bestowing upon Esau, this blessing has never worked for Jacob. Instead, the blessing Jacob has stolen (Gen. 27:27-29) worked out in the life of Esau. Isaac's blessings are crossed — in other words, they worked out as initially intended by Isaac: the blessing in Gen. 27:27-29 is meant for Esau, and the blessing in Gen. 27:39-40 is meant for Jacob.

On the one hand, the blessing in Gen. 27:27-29 is meant for Esau and it works out for Esau in the narrative despite the fact that Jacob has stolen it by deceit. When Jacob calls Esau lord and bows down seven times before him, Isaac's presumable expectation of Esau's lordship over family (thus including Jacob) shown in Gen. 27:29 comes to its partial fulfilment. Isaac thought that he was giving this blessing to Esau and must have expected Esau's lordship over Jacob, not vice versa. Even though it was Jacob who was the actual

recipient, this has not changed the destiny of two brothers. Esau's brothers and sons of his mother, according to Isaac's blessing in Gen. 27:29, are predicted to serve Esau.[458] As the blessing in Gen. 27:29 predicted, Jacob calls Esau lord, bows down seven times before him, and thus plays a role of serving Esau. Esau is the lord over Jacob here. As a man with four hundred men, he is also a powerful patriarch whom nations or peoples may serve or bow down to as predicted in Gen. 27:29. At least, Esau will not be easily defeated by an attack from any other tribes.

According to Gen. 27:29, Isaac also predicted that cursed be every one who curses "you" — presumably "Esau" as Isaac thought that he was giving this blessing to Esau. Who could be one who curses Esau and become cursed within the Esau-Jacob narrative? Jacob would be regarded as the closest candidate who curses Esau by stealing his brother's blessing and becoming himself cursed. After stealing the blessing meant for Esau, Jacob lived a miserable life. As previously mentioned, Jacob suffered from Laban's and his sons' deceits (cf. Genesis 29-31; Genesis 37). He had to see the rape of his daughter Dinah and massive slaughters by Levi and Simeon (Genesis 34). He lost his favourite wife Rachel (Gen. 35:19). He became lame (Genesis 32). He lived as a wanderer and never settled down. His life cannot be easily seen as "blessed by God" from a human perspective. It is closer to a life *cursed.* As the blessing meant for Esau in Gen. 27:27-29 predicts, Jacob, who can be regarded as cursing Esau, lived a miserable life which is almost closer to a "cursed" life. Such a life of Jacob can be understood in light of the prediction "cursed be every one who curses you." (Gen. 27:39).

On the other hand, the blessing in Gen. 27:39-40 is originally meant for Jacob and works out for Jacob in the narrative despite the fact that Isaac has

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[458]As I have discussed previously, brothers or mother's sons can be also understood as a poetic expression in the Hebrew Bible. See page 158 of the present study.

announced it to Esau. Jacob, who has stolen Isaac's blessing for Esau (cf. Gen. 27:27-29), is ironically within the influence of Isaac's blessing given to Esau (cf. Gen. 27:39-40). The blessing given to Esau was initially supposed to be Jacob's. As a father of two sons, Isaac must have thought of bestowing two kinds of blessings for his two sons. If we call one a primary blessing, then the other could be a secondary blessing. Or they could be simply different kinds of blessings. Isaac said what he wanted to say in his blessing for Esau when he in fact blessed Jacob. When Esau asks his father any reserved blessing for him, Isaac cannot help but give a blessing that he intended for Jacob. The blessing given to Esau is in fact what Isaac wanted to say to Jacob in his blessing. Although the blessing meant for Esau (Gen. 27:27-29) was not given to Esau due to Rebekah's and Jacob's deceit, Isaac's blessings for two sons work as initially intended by Isaac despite the deception.

Jacob, although he is the heir of Abrahamic line in the end, had to live according to Isaac's blessing given to Esau (Gen. 27:39-40) which was originally meant for Jacob himself.[459] First, it is not Esau who *lived by the sword.* It is rather Jacob whose life can be depicted as living by the sword.[460] To be precise, Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi lived by the sword, by killing all the Shechemites with the sword (cf. Gen. 34:1-31). Later on, when Jacob meets Joseph, he tells Joseph that he will give him one mountain slope that he took from the hand of Amorites "with his *sword*" (Gen. 48:21-22). The sword portrays the life of Jacob's family.

Secondly, it is Jacob who *served his brother.* As discussed previously, Jacob is the one who is ready to serve his brother by calling himself a servant

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[459]Gen. 27:39-40 reads, "Behold, from the fertility of the earth shall your dwelling be, and from the dew of the heavens above; and by your sword you shall live and you shall serve your brother but as you wander you shall break his yoke from your neck." (My Translation)

[460]For further discussion, see pages 136 to 137 of this study.

(Gen. 32:4, 18, 20; Gen. 33:5), calling Esau a lord (Gen. 32:4-5, 18, Gen. 33:8, 13), and bowing down seven times before him (Gen. 33:3).

Thirdly, the last part of the blessing, *as you wander restlessly (*or *roam)*[461] *you shall break his yoke from your neck* (וְהָיָה כַּאֲשֶׁר תָּרִיד וּפָרַקְתָּ עֻלּוֹ מֵעַל צַוָּארֶךָ), is also meant for Jacob. I have previously offered an alternative and favourable reading of this part of blessing when it applies to Esau, but it is more applicable to Jacob's life rather than Esau's life. It works for Jacob. His *yoke*, a general metaphor for slavery or bondage, can legitimately imply the fear of Esau that Jacob had while he has been fleeing away from Esau at Laban's house. Before Jacob meets Esau again, Jacob can be described as one who *wanders restlessly*. For Jacob, twenty years of sojourn with Laban is a time of wandering restlessly as Isaac's blessing in Gen. 27:39-40 predicted. Without his home or even a place to stay comfortably, Jacob had to sojourn with Laban's family over twenty years. As God promised to Jacob, Haran is not a place where Jacob will stay for his life time. He must go back to the land where he is born and God promised to bring him back (Gen. 31:3, 13; cf. Gen. 28:15). However, Jacob's plan to return to his home suddenly must have reminded him of his fear of Esau. The fear of Esau is the yoke that Esau has put against Jacob's neck. Consequently, when Jacob meets Esau again, he cannot help calling Esau his lord because of his fear of Esau. He already knows that he is nothing more than a servant before Esau. He has been already serving Esau in his mind, while he was serving Laban. He has been afraid. He has been afraid of Esau. He wants to be free from his yoke. The yoke is not only the physical bondage under his brother. It is Jacob's fear that his brother Esau will kill him someday. Now, however, by acknowledging Esau as a lord officially, his fear partly has gone. His brother

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[461] I have translated רוד as "to wander" (or to roam).

Esau did not kill him although Esau bore a grudge against his brother twenty years ago (cf. Gen. 27:41).

To break Esau's yoke completely, Jacob needs to wander. After Jacob meets Esau after twenty years of wandering, Jacob decides not to follow Esau in Seir and wanders again by leaving Esau. The life after Jacob's reunion with Esau is also a life of a wanderer. Jacob wanders around places such as Succoth, Shechem, Eder, Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), Mamre (or Kiriatharba —that is, Hebron), and Beersheba (cf. Gen. 33:17-18, Gen. 35:19, 21, 27; Gen. 46:1). Jacob even migrates to Egypt (Gen. 46:6) and then has to be carried back to Canaan to be buried (cf. Gen. 50:13) —wandering even after death. As Deut. 26:5 addresses Jacob as a *wandering*[462] Aramean, Jacob's life has been a life of wandering and unpleasant experiences. As Jacob himself confesses before Pharaoh, the days of his life has been few and evil[463] (Gen. 47:9; cf. ASV, ESV, JPS, KJV, NKJ, RSV). Within the Esau-Jacob narrative, it is not clear when Jacob comes to break Esau's yoke completely by overcoming his fear of Esau. It may be his meeting with Esau again at his father's funeral (cf. Gen. 35:29). At the time Jacob meets Esau when he comes back to Canaan (cf. Genesis 33), Jacob could have broken Esau's yoke because he already wandered over twenty years. However, Jacob does not look like he has broken his yoke completely in this scene. His fear has not completely disappeared, as readers can see his distant and careful attitude toward Esau (cf. Genesis 33).

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[462]The Hebrew term here is not the same term used in Gen. 27:40. While רוד is used in Gen. 27:40, the term אָבַד is used in Deut. 25:5. However, both terms contain similar nuance such as "wandering restlessly". The term אָבַד can also connote nuances such as going astray, perishing, and being ruined.

[463]Or few and difficult [NIV]; few and unpleasant [NASB]; few and hard [NRSV, TNK]; cf. Gen. 47:9. Consider incidents happened in Jacob's life: the disability of Jacob himself (cf. Gen. 32:32), the rape of Dinah (cf. Genesis 34), the mass slaughter of Shechemites by Levi and Simeon (cf. Genesis 34), the deceit of his sons on behalf of his favourite son Joseph (cf. Genesis 37), and so on.

I have suggested that the blessing for Esau (cf. Gen. 27:39-40) rather has worked for Jacob instead of Esau. Whether we apply this blessing to Esau or Jacob for interpretation, both interpretations are plausible. However, I am more inclined to apply it to Jacob's life, thus taking the interpretation that although Isaac's blessing intended for Esau is stolen at the time of bestowing, it still works as initially intended. Blessings that Jacob received without deceit such as Isaac's second blessing for Jacob ("Blessing for Jacob II"; cf. Gen. 28:2-4) and a mysterious man's blessing ("Blessing for Jacob V"; cf. Gen. 32:29) are blessings supposed to be Jacob's, although they are also ambiguous in their nature.

When Jacob meets Esau again, Jacob gives his blessing to Esau. Gen. 33:11 literally reads: "please, take בִּרְכָתִי , *my blessing*, which has been brought to you." In Gen. 33:10, Jacob asked Esau to take his מִנְחָה , *gift* , but in Gen. 33:11 Jacob changes his words, asking Esau again to take his בְּרָכָה , *blessing*.[464] A literal translation of Gen. 33:11 may indicate that Jacob is returning his blessing stolen from Esau. Jacob's words may indicate his apology to Esau. If he thought he could return this blessing, this would be Jacob's misunderstanding. He does not need to return this blessing, because, whether he returns it or not, it does not change anything between them. As previously mentioned, Devora Steinmetz suggests that Jacob returns the blessing which he has stolen from Esau because this is not a significant blessing.[465] However, I am more convinced that Jacob could return this

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[464]This is noted by many commentators. For example, John E. Hartley comments, "Jacob insisted that Esau take these gifts, referring to them as a 'blessing' (*berakah*; NIV 'present'). With this term he made Esau aware that accepting them was compensation for his having stolen their father's blessing (27:27-29)." See Hartley, *Genesis*, 289. Cf. Cotter, *Genesis*, 251; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 346; Scullion, *Genesis*, 236.

[465]Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 111, 182. n.53. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 234; Terence E. Fretheim, "Which Blessing Does Isaac Give Jacob?" in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (eds Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky; SBL Symposium Series 8; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 289–90.

blessing because the blessing which he has stolen from Esau has never worked in his life. Looking back his life, Jacob probably knew that his life began to be miserable since he has stolen the blessing which he does not deserve.

This miserable life of Jacob is also due to his purchase of the birthright which does not belong to him. The birthright that he purchased with greed or ambitions is nothing but an illusion. Esau might have spent long years with envy and hatred, longing for his sold-out birthright and blessing which he thought had been stolen by his brother. However, the birthright or the blessing is not a guarantor of prosperity, peace, security, and happiness. After twenty years of separation from his brother, now Esau sees how little the birthright and blessing had really brought his brother Jacob. Jeffrey M Cohen describes the portrayal of Jacob in front of him this way:

> Before him stood a brother, physically maimed, a fugitive, the victim of a cruel deceit that lumbered him with a wife he did not love, a man living in constant fear of the day of reckoning at the hands of his brother, a man to whose life the birthright had been an irrelevance and a liability.[466]

Jacob who bought the birthright and stole the blessing from Esau does not get anything at this moment.[467] The birthright and stolen blessing cannot secure or guarantee anything for a deceiver. The birthright does nothing for Esau either. Esau achieved his current status without the privilege of the birthright, without any presumable heritage from his father. The birthright and blessings rather come to separate the two brothers. What results for Jacob is "a wasted youth, a legacy of pain and misery, estrangement and failure."[468] He is a loser, not a

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[466]Jeffrey M. Cohen, "The Jacob-Esau Reunion," *JBQ* 21 (1993): 162.

[467]Cohen, "The Jacob-Esau Reunion," 162. Jeffrey M. Cohen mentions what little the birthright had brought for Jacob, but he does not mention what little the stolen blessing had brought for Jacob.

[468]Cohen, "The Jacob-Esau Reunion," 163.

winner. He is a servant, not a master. From the narrative itself, it is hard to say that Jacob is the one who is more successful and blessed than Esau. It is rather Esau who becomes more successful and blessed. Whereas Esau became a prosperous nation, Jacob wandered without a home to settle until he dies in Egypt. Jacob never lived the life of one who could share the divine blessing with other people. The one who is more attractive and draws readers' favour is not Jacob but Esau.

3. Esau, a Forgiving Brother

Whatever defects Esau previously might have, his attempt to reconcile with his brother Jacob gives him a favourable portrait in the end. Reflecting on what Jacob did toward Esau—cheating his brother out of birthright and blessing, readers, as Jacob did, could be more inclined to expect the worst scenario when Jacob and Esau meet again after a separation of twenty years. After all, Jacob had fled from home because of Esau's death-threat (Gen. 27:41). Nevertheless, Jacob's expectation of the worst proves to be unfounded. Esau does not mention the wrongs Jacob did to him. This shows that Esau does not care about Jacob's wrongs anymore at least, or even that Esau has unconditionally forgiven his brother.[469] The narrator describes Esau's warm welcome of his brother with expressions which show Esau's joy such as *embracing*[470] Jacob, *falling on his neck*,[471] *kissing*[472] him, and *weeping*.[473]

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[469]John Hartley comments, "That Esau did not mention the wrongs he had suffered at Jacob's hands confirmed his unconditional forgiveness of his brother." See Hartley, *Genesis*, 289.

[470]וַיְחַבְּקֵהוּ (and he [Esau] embraced him[Jacob]).

[471]וַיִּפֹּל עַל־צַוָּארָו (and he [Esau] fell on his [Jacob's] neck).

[472]וַיִּשָּׁקֵהוּ (and he [Esau] kissed him[Jacob]).

[473] וַיִּבְכּוּ (and they wept). R. Christopher Heard comments, "Esau's warm reception of his brother is described by the narrator in terms of increasing intimacy: first an embrace, perhaps somewhat formal, then an enthusiastic hug ('he fell on his neck') followed by a kiss and even

Although Esau had sworn revenge on Jacob twenty years ago, readers come to find that Esau now comports himself as a brother, not as a revenger any more. The narrator never tells the reader what has changed Esau's heart, but the narrative supports Esau's sincere attitude toward his brother. However, not all Genesis commentators agree with this notion because of their negative suppositions about Esau, and this section is devoted to discussing their arguments as to whether Esau's attitude to Jacob is sincere or not.

Several Genesis commentators such as Hermann Gunkel and John Skinner doubt the sincerity of Esau's change of heart.[474] For example, Skinner points out that it cannot be reasonably doubted that Esau's attitude toward Jacob was hostile and Jacob gained "a diplomatic victory over him."[475] On the other hand, he comments, "the narrator must be acquitted of a desire to humiliate Esau. If he was vanquished by generosity, the noblest qualities of manhood were released in him; and he displays a chivalrous magnanimity which no appreciative audience could ever have held in contempt. So far as any national feeling is reflected, it is one of genuine respect and goodwill towards the Edomites."[476]

Similarly, Peter Lockwood insists that there are two aspects of Esau's portrayal in Genesis 33 and his argument may be considered one of the strong counterarguments against mine. For this reason, his main arguments will be discussed in detail in this chapter. According to Lockwood, from one

the shedding of tears. The narrator piles up verbs to emphasize Esau's joy at being reunited with his brother." See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 128. See also Alter, *Genesis*, 184; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 344; Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*, 133; von Rad, *Genesis*, 327; Skinner, *Genesis*, 412.

[474]See Gunkel, *Genesis*, 354; Skinner, *Genesis*, 412. For example, Skinner asks, "Was Esau's purpose friendly from the first, or was he turned from thoughts of vengeance by Jacob's submissive and flattering demeanour?"

[475]Skinner, *Genesis*, 412.

[476]Skinner, *Genesis*, 412.

perspective, Esau fully forgives Jacob and Genesis 33 is the story of the reconciliation between the two brothers. From a different angle, however, he insists that Esau remains hostile and the story is about the two brothers who remain at odds with each other and locked in a tense battle.[477] I agree with Lockwood that Jacob's meeting with Esau may not be a complete reconciliation. However, this is not completely due to a dual portrait of Esau. It is not Esau who remains hostile as Lockwood insisted. Rather, I suggest that it is Jacob who remains suspicious toward his brother's intention and this is what causes the failure of true reconciliation between brothers. In the following sections, I will discuss scholarly doubts about Esau's change of heart by explaining various portrayals of Esau such as running, falling on his brother's neck, kissing, crying, and his initial refusal of gifts from Jacob.

Exploring the Significance of Esau's Actions toward Jacob

In Gen. 33:4, the narrator shows how warmly Esau responds to his long-lost brother by using several verbs of intimate actions. As far as the text can reveal, readers cannot easily find any murderous hatred that Esau had before. Esau's actions such as "running", "embracing", "falling on the neck", "kissing", and "weeping" typically shows a way of greeting relatives in the Bible, especially in the patriarchal times.[478] When people in the patriarchal narrative met someone very important or joyful, they greeted people with some of these actions. For example, Laban, when he heard the news of his sister's

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[477]Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 3–4.

[478]See Waltke, *Genesis*, 454; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 298. Gordon J. Wenham cites only "running" (Gen. 24:17; 29:12, 13), "embracing" (Gen. 29:13; 48:10), falling "on the neck" (Gen. 45:14), and "weeping" (Gen. 29:11; 45:14, 15; 46:29) as normal terms used for the ways of greeting relatives in the Bible. However, a kiss is also often used as a way of greeting relatives or close friends in the Bible. See Gen. 29:11; Exod. 4:27; 18:7; 1 Sam. 20:41; 2 Sam. 14:33, Luke 15:20. E. A. Speiser compares Esau's action of falling upon the neck and kissing with Enuma Elish. See Speiser, *Genesis*, 259.

son Jacob, *ran* to meet him,[479] *embraced* him,[480] *kissed* him,[481] and brought Jacob to his house (Gen. 29:13). When Joseph brought his two children to Jacob for blessing, Jacob *kissed* and *embraced* them (Gen. 48:10).[482] When Jacob saw Rachel, he *kissed* her, lifted his voice, and *wept* (Gen. 29:11).[483] As in these biblical references, Esau warmly and joyfully greets his brother Jacob after a long separation. Jacob's fear and the narrative tension are resolved by Esau's warm welcome. Esau's warm greeting also signifies forgiving his brother, even though the narrator does not directly mention that Esau forgave Jacob. Genesis commentators such as Hermann Gunkel and John Skinner suggest another possibility, that Esau may be bought off by Jacob,[484] but it is more plausible from the narrative context that what happened some twenty years ago is no longer important to Esau. Evidence of this will be discussed further in this section.

Contrary to Esau's warm attitude toward Jacob, Jacob's actions toward his brother Esau are formal and ceremonial. It is psychologically common that a person who deceived someone cannot easily believe that the one who has been deceived can possibly forgive him/her.[485] The Hebrew Bible also contains several examples of this phenomenon. When Jacob passed away,

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[479] וַיָּרָץ לִקְרָאתוֹ

[480] וַיְחַבֶּק־לוֹ

[481] וַיְנַשֶּׁק־לוֹ

[482] וַיִּשַּׁק לָהֶם וַיְחַבֵּק לָהֶם

[483] וַיִּשַּׁק יַעֲקֹב לְרָחֵל וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת־קֹלוֹ וַיֵּבְךְּ. For further examples, before Laban departed and returned to his place after his quarrel with Jacob, Laban *kissed* his sons and daughters and blessed them (Gen. 31:55). After Joseph revealed himself to his brother, Joseph *kissed* all his brothers and *wept* on them (Gen. 45:15). When Jacob has died, Joseph *fell on* his father's face and *wept* over him and *kissed* him (Gen. 50:1).

[484] See Gunkel, *Genesis*, 354; Skinner, *Genesis*, 412.

[485] Gerhard von Rad says, "One sees, however, how little confidence Jacob has in this turn of affairs for the good by his stubborn refusal of Esau's friendly offer to accompany him. That is the mistrust of one who himself has often deceived." See von von Rad, *Genesis*, 328.

Joseph's brothers' plea to Joseph for forgiveness shows that they did not believe that Joseph had completely forgiven them (Gen. 50:17). As scholars such as Laurence A. Turner point out, Joseph's attitudes toward his brothers in fact are dubious and raise the question whether Joseph has easily forgiven his brothers.[486] However, Esau's actions toward his brother Jacob are not the same as the dubious attitudes of Joseph toward his brothers. Esau's speech and actions generally show his sincere forgiveness to Jacob, but for some scholars, some of Esau's actions such as kissing and crying may be regarded as dubious.

Esau's Kiss and Tears

Although Esau's kiss and tears in his reunion with Jacob (Gen. 33:4) could be simply understood as his warm and joyful attitude toward Jacob, a few Genesis commentators and scholars still doubt Esau's sincerity here.[487] Esau's kiss and tears have been regarded even as a hypocritical act in rabbinic literature. However, it is negative scholarly assumptions about Esau which lead Genesis commentators and scholars to be skeptical about Esau's kiss and crying and doubt his sincerity. Let us examine scholarly doubts about Esau's two actions, kiss and crying, and see how they are unfounded.

First, does Esau's kiss have nothing to do with his generous attitude toward Jacob? Peter Lockwood is one of the scholars who strongly insists in the dubious nature of Esau's kiss. Citing Prov. 27:6, "The kisses of an enemy may be profuse, but faithful are the wounds of a friend", Lockwood states that "the Israelites were keenly aware that hugs and kisses could provide a

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[486]Laurence A. Turner comments, "It is difficult to see why a 'quick pardon' could not have produced a reconciliation. In fact Joseph subjects his family to such severe treatment that any reconciliation is threatened." See Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 158. Cf. Fung, *Victim and Victimizer*, 34. n.51. Fung summarises several criticisms of Joseph's bizarre behaviour.

[487]Gunkel, *Genesis*, 354; Skinner, *Genesis*, 412. See also Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 4–5.

smokescreen for malevolent thoughts and intentions."[488] He further supports this idea with two examples: (1) Judas Iscariot has betrayed his master with a kiss (Matt. 26:48, 49); (2) Laban's kissing Jacob in the Jacob cycle.[489] Lockwood develops his argument further based on the second example. Lockwood comments:

> Far more importantly, however, kisses have already taken on a peculiar twist in the Jacob cycle. At their first meeting, Laban was seen running to meet Jacob, kissing him (29:13), and exclaiming, 'Surely you are my bone and my flesh' (29:14). That was more the kiss of admiration for a fellow cheat than a kiss of affection, a kiss also given in gleeful anticipation that Jacob might stay for some time and give Laban the chance to deprive him of a substantial share of the family's wealth (24:29-33). As with Jacob and Esau in chapter 33, the meeting between Jacob and Laban began with a kiss and ended without one (31:55; cf. 33:15-17). Laban kissed Jacob when he first met him and coveted his wealth and shared and admired his duplicity. The way is left wide open to interpret Esau's kiss as something other than a sign of affection and reconciliation.[490]

Although Lockwood's examples show the dubious nature of kisses in the Bible, these examples are too peculiar to insist that Esau's kiss is something other than a sign of joy, affection or greeting. First of all, Judas' kiss is the only incident in which a kiss is used as a sign of betrayal. As mentioned previously, the kiss as a sign of joy, affection or greetings for relatives is far more dominant than a sign of betrayal throughout the Bible. The negative connotation of kiss is extremely rare throughout the Bible. In particular, Esau's kissing Jacob recalls Aaron's kissing to Moses as a sign of greeting between brothers.[491] There is no sign of betrayal here between these brothers. In the

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[488]Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 4.

[489]Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 4–5.

[490]Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 5.

[491]See Exod. 14:7. Cf. Exodus Rabbah 5:10. Cf. Lehrman, *Exodus*, 90.

New Testament, the kiss is also mostly a sign of greeting among believers of Jesus.[492] Even though Judas' kiss had a purpose other than a sign of joy, affection or greeting, it does not exclude its main purpose. Judas' kiss is still a sign of greeting from the viewpoint of the disciples who were around Jesus.

In the second instance, Lockwood's interpretation of Laban's kiss as the kiss of admiration for a fellow cheat is surely an overinterpretation. The narrative plot up to Laban's first meeting with Jacob never shows that Laban already knew Jacob's cheating character. As Lockwood suggests, Laban's kiss may be derived from his gleeful anticipation that Jacob might bring some gifts for his family like Abraham's servant did (Gen. 24:22, 30, 53).[493] Gen. 24:30, where Laban saw the gold ring and the gold bracelet on Rebekah's arms, and went to meet Abraham's servant (Gen. 24:29-33), indirectly shows Laban's greedy character. Nevertheless, whatever reason Laban had for kissing Jacob, there need be no doubt that Laban was joyful when meeting Jacob.

Although Lockwood insists that Esau's kiss could mean something other than affection, Lockwood himself does not directly suggest what Esau intended in his kiss. Lockwood simply accepts the polemic interpretation of Esau's kiss in rabbinic literature, such as the idea that it is a cover for Esau biting[494] Jacob. He suggests that Masoretic six *puncta extraordinaria* over "kiss" invite the reader to "consider the possibility that the kiss was anything but a sign of renewed friendship,"[495] but he does not clearly suggest his own thought on the intention of Esau's kiss.

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[492]For example, see Acts 20:37; Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thes. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14.

[493]Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 5.

[494]In Hebrew, the verbs נָשַׁךְ (to bite) and נָשַׁק (to kiss) look similar in its verbal stem and sound.

[495]Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 5.

At the least, the kiss in the Bible does not generally have negative connotations. It even signifies forgiveness on several occasions. For example, the scene of Esau welcoming his homecoming brother is similar to one of the parables of Jesus where a father welcomes his homecoming son (Luke 15:11-32).[496] Both Esau and the father fell on the neck and *kissed* the homecoming brother/son. The kiss on both occasions is more than an indication of a joy. It legitimately can imply forgiveness from a brother/father.[497] This parable of Jesus in the New Testament may not be entirely applicable to the story of Esau kissing Jacob, but the parallels between these stories show that kissing someone is more likely conveying positive connotations such as joy, affection, greeting, or even forgiveness rather than negative connotations such as a sign of betrayal or deceit.

Secondly, is Esau's crying (or weeping) a hypocritical act? Rabbinic tradition has taken Esau's tears as a hypocritical act. According to Genesis Rabbah 78:9, Esau wept because he bit Jacob's neck but his neck turned into smooth ivory stone. On the other hand, Jacob wept because of the pain in his neck caused by Esau's bite.[498] By introducing this kind of rabbinic interpretation, Peter Lockwood questions the intention of Esau's crying.[499] This interpretation, however, is caused by negative bias against Esau, not by any textual clue in the Esau-Jacob narrative. This becomes evident when we look at how rabbinic literature treated the parallel behaviour of Joseph. Esau's

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[496]See Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 344.

[497]There is another instance in the Bible where a kiss signifies acceptance, forgiveness or reconciliation. When Absalom, who killed his brother Amnon, ran away to Geshur, and spent three years there, returned to Jerusalem, David has not met Absalom for two years (2 Sam. 14:28). After two years of Absalom's sojourn in Jerusalem, David summoned Absalom and kissed him. In this scene, David's kiss is likely more than a sign of greeting.

[498]See Genesis Rabbah 78:9. For further discussion, see Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 129–30.

[499]See Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 4–5.

falling on Jacob's neck and weeping parallels Joseph's behaviour when he met Benjamin (cf. Gen. 45:14) and his father Jacob (Gen. 46:29).[500] Joseph fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept. Joseph also fell on his father Jacob's neck and wept upon his neck a long time. However, rabbinic literature does not question the sincerity of Joseph's behaviour.[501] Why, then, should Esau's behaviour be questioned? Is this not caused by prejudice against Esau?

In Genesis 33, there is no strong evidence for interpreting Esau's action of weeping as hypocritical.[502] Esau and Jacob weeping together is certainly a dramatic and touching scene at this very moment, and it recalls David and Jonathan weeping together (cf. 1 Sam. 20:41) and their close friendship. If any one of either Esau and Jacob is hypocritical, Jacob, who always tends to think of plan B, would be a better candidate. Unlike Jacob, Esau is rather an impulsive character who is not good at covering his inner thoughts.

The last part of Gen. 33:4 rather gives a clue to question Jacob's weeping as a hypocritical act. A majority of Genesis commentators translate the last part of Gen. 33:4 as "*they* (both Esau and Jacob) wept."[503] Gen. 33:4 in the Masoretic text, however, raises the question about who wept. As Genesis commentators such as Robert Alter, E. A. Speiser, David M. Cotter, and Victor P. Hamilton noted, "*they* wept" could be legitimately a case of dittography, a scribal error of writing the same letter twice.[504] Textual

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[500]Cf. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 343.

[501]See how Genesis Rabbah, which doubts the sincerity of Esau's kiss and weeping, comments on Joseph's behaviour. Cf. Genesis Rabbah 93:12. See Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 310–1.

[502]There is an occasion in the Hebrew Bible where weeping or mourning is used as deceptively. See the story of a wise woman in Tekoa (cf. 2 Sam. 14).

[503]See Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 298; Turner, *Genesis*, 144.

[504]See Alter, *Genesis*, 185; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 340; Speiser, *Genesis*, 259.

traditions such as LXX and Targum Onqelos have the plural suffix on וַיִּבְכּוּ, *they wept*,[505] but *BHS* emends this part to וַיִּבְךְ, *he wept* in the textual notes. I am not suggesting here that "he wept" is a better reading than "they wept", but "*he* (Esau) wept" in fact fits better with the portrayals of Esau and Jacob in Genesis 33. Jacob remains suspicious of his brother and distances himself from Esau by using lord-servant language. While Esau wants to journey with Jacob, Jacob deceives his brother by saying that he is going to Seir, and then goes on his way to Succoth and Shechem right after he parts from Esau. As Jacob has been distant to his brother Esau, it is more likely that Jacob's tears could be a sign of his deceptive and hypocritical character rather than Esau's tears. However, we do not necessarily need to interpret either Esau's tears or Jacob's tears as hypocritical.

Esau Accepting Jacob's Gift, Jacob Finding Favour?

Besides Esau kissing and crying, the simplest interpretation of Esau's action of accepting Jacob's gift is that he has accepted Jacob and forgiven him. However, Peter Lockwood still questions even this action. Jacob prepares a gift before he meets Esau. Jacob's motivation for this gift is most likely a means of peace offering and appeasing Esau's anger. Lockwood is more explicit about Jacob's motivation for gift-giving: *to find favour.* When Jacob sends messengers to Esau before he meets Esau, he asks them to tell Esau that Jacob has sent flocks *to find favour* (לִמְצֹא־חֵן) in Esau's sight (Gen. 32:5 [MT 32:6]). When Esau later meets Jacob and asks, "What do you mean by all this company which I met?", Jacob answered, "*To find favour* in the sight of my lord." (Gen. 33:8) Pointing out these repetitions, Lockwood insists that Jacob's explicit intention for preparing gifts is *in order to find favour in the eyes of*

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[505]cf. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 340. n.6.

Esau (cf. Gen. 32:5, 20; Gen. 33:8, 10, 15), but Esau as a defiant brother refuses to give Jacob what Jacob is looking for in return: *favour in his brother's eyes*, even though Esau finally accepts Jacob's gift.[506] His argument that Esau refused to give favour to Jacob is based on Jacob's words to Esau when Esau suggested that he leave some of his men with Jacob: "What need is there? Let me find favour in the sight of my lord." (Gen. 33:15). Lockwood understands that Jacob is still pleading for favour from Esau here. Lockwood insists that Esau has not given favour to Jacob, but he does not properly interprete the meaning of *finding favour* in Gen. 33:15. As noted by several commentators, such as S. R. Driver and Bruce K. Waltke, finding favour in Gen. 33:15 implies a polite way of declining Esau's offer.[507] Furthermore, Jacob himself acknowledged that Esau *has received him favourably*[508] (וַתִּרְצֵנִי; cf. Gen. 33:10). Lockwood argues that what Jacob says in Gen. 33:10 is Jacob's wishful thinking, because they are Jacob's words, not Esau's.[509] However, Lockwood seems to overlook the first part of Gen. 33:10 where Jacob asks Esau to accept his gift *if he has found favour in the sight of Esau* (אִם־נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ). We need to note that Esau eventually comes to accept Jacob's gift when Jacob urges Esau to accept it. Accepting Jacob's gift thus means Esau is agreeing to give what Jacob expects in return: finding favour[510] in his brother's eyes.

Jacob offered a gift because he wanted to find favour in the sight of Esau, which also legitimately implies seeking *forgiveness* from Esau. Contrary

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[506]Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 5.

[507]See Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 299; Waltke, *Genesis*, 456.

[508]Or "was pleased with him."

[509]Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 9. n.2.

[510]For the usage of "finding favour" in the Hebrew Bible, see Exod. 33:13; Num. 11:15; Ruth. 2:2; 1 Sam. 1:18; 25:8; 2 Sam. 15:25; 16:4; Prov. 3:4; 28:23. Finding favour is closely related with seeing one's eye (or face). It could also imply client/patron (or vassal/suzerain) relationship of the treaties in the ancient Near East.

to Lockwood's argument, Esau's initial refusal of the gift is not a sign of rejecting what Jacob seeks from Esau. A plausible implication of Esau's initial refusal of Jacob's gift is that no gift is needed for Esau because what Jacob has done to Esau has been forgiven. Judging from Esau's impulsive character, it is also possible that Esau has already forgotten the past. When Jacob asks Esau to accept his gift, Esau thus courteously refuses to accept it by saying, "I have plenty. Keep what you have for yourself." (Gen. 33:9)[511] These words of Esau are not easily freed from polemic or negative interpretation. If one decides to interpret Esau negatively, interpretation cannot help viewing Esau negatively. This is what Peter Lockwood does, and the reason why I comment on Lockwood's interpretation frequently in this chapter is that his interpretation is not only a typical example of scholarly bias against Esau but also the most strong counterargument against my favourable reading of Esau's reunion with Jacob. As Lockwood suggested, one may reasonably suggest that Esau never says that *there is nothing to forgive*,[512] but that "I have plenty (or much). Keep what you have for yourself." Lockwood says:

> Esau's declining Jacob's gift has been invariably read as a mark of courtesy. It is Esau's way of saying that no gift is necessary because the past has been forgiven and forgotten. But Esau does not say there is nothing to forgive, but 'I have plenty' or 'I have much' (v.9). When a visiting dignitary is offered a gift by the leader of a host country, it would be highly offensive to turn down the gift. No matter how wealthy the recipient, he or she would always accept out of respect for the donor. Regardless of status or nationality, this is accepted practice in the relationship of host and guest. Therefore, Esau's initial refusal to accept Jacob's gift is another clear indication of his rejection of Jacob's plea for favour.[513]

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[511]It is also possible that the refusal of the gift when first offered is a sign of showing politeness.

[512]Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 6.

[513]Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 6.

As Lockwood comments, the nature of Jacob's gift-giving certainly needs to be understood in its cultural background which emphasises not turning down the gift no matter how wealthy the recipient is. However, Lockwood seems to overlook other aspects of gift-giving practice in the ancient Near East. The meaning of gift-giving in ancient Near East may not be quite the same as gift-giving today. Victor H. Matthews, in the abstract of his article "The Unwanted Gift: Implications of Obligatory Gift Giving in Ancient Israel,"[514] comments that "reciprocity is at the heart of both hospitality and gift-giving traditions in the ancient Near East."[515] Lockwood may be right in that Jacob expects to receive favour in the sight of Esau in return by giving Esau enormous flocks,[516] but the one who is offensive in this gift-giving scene between the two brothers is not Esau but Jacob. Although Esau initially rejected Jacob's gift, Esau in the end accepted Jacob's gifts. Now, it is Esau's turn to give something to Jacob in return.

Esau, obliged to offer something to Jacob after accepting Jacob's gift, suggests accompanying Jacob. Esau's offer of physical protection for wounded Jacob is also a form of gift offering.[517] Those who favour Jacob may interpret this scene that Esau's intention here is to take Jacob under his control. However, if Esau's intention was to control Jacob, he could have left some of his men to keep an eye on Jacob regardless of Jacob's rejection of his offer. After all, it is not Esau but Jacob who makes excuses and turns down Esau's offer. As Lockwood comments, this is highly offensive behaviour. As Victor

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[514]Victor H. Matthews, "The Unwanted Gift: Implications of Obligatory Gift Giving in Ancient Israel," *Semeia* 87 (1999): 91–104.

[515]Matthews, "The Unwanted Gift," 91.

[516]Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 5.

[517]Cf. Matthews, "The Unwanted Gift," 98. However, Matthews overinterprets that this gift offering would "transform Jacob and his household into a subsidiary position of clientage."

H. Matthews points out, the principle of reciprocity in the gift-giving traditions of ancient Near East also shows that Jacob's attitude toward his brother's kind offer is very rude. Although Esau asked him again to accept his kind favour, Jacob does not want to accept his brother's favour. Jacob himself remains distant to the favour of Esau. Thus, it is not Esau who refuses to give Jacob favour but Jacob who rejects any favour from Esau.

In his negative interpretation of Esau's words, Lockwood further comments about Esau's initial refusal of Jacob's gift:

> After saying 'I have much' or 'I am fed up', Esau adds, 'Keep what you have for yourself', or more literally 'may yours be what is yours' (v.9). Friendly as this sounds, it also conceals a threat. The flipside of 'may yours be what is yours' is 'may mine be what is mine'. In other words, Esau is obliquely accusing Jacob of failing to keep his hands off what did not belong to him two decades ago.[518]

The phrase "may yours be what is yours" is a speech which itself does not contain any hostility against Jacob. In general, three ways of interpreting this speech can be suggested: understanding this statement in a positive way, a neutral way, or a negative way. First, if one does not hate Esau and reads Esau's words in a positive sense, this speech is Esau's polite way of expressing his difficulty in accepting Jacob's enormous gift. Secondly, one could read this sentence in an objective way and not care about what Esau secretly intended by this word. Thirdly, if one does not favour Esau and doubts Esau's motivation, then this is his way of obliquely making cynical remarks about Jacob.

If my reading of Esau is reading Esau favourably, Lockwood's reading is reading Esau in a negative way. This example clearly shows how the same speech of the characters can be evaluated differently according to the reader's

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[518]Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 7.

attitude to a certain character. There could be a more strongly polemical interpretation of Esau that I have not found yet. However, there are compelling arguments that Esau is portrayed after all as a forgiving brother in the Esau-Jacob narrative.[519] Reading Esau's initial refusal of Jacob's gift negatively goes too far from a common sense reading of the narrative. The crucial question to ask is not the implication of Esau's initial refusal of Jacob's gift, but the nature of Jacob's gift.

The nature of Jacob's gift itself needs further consideration. Jacob's gift-giving for Esau in fact may not be close to the common sense of gift-giving today. Gift-giving in our day is usually to express our gratitude or genuine concern for someone. It is not quite normal that one gives a gift to someone whom he or she has harmed. This action could be misunderstood as a bribe. Jacob's gift offering in its nature is not completely free from having certain characteristics of a bribe or an appeasement. This may be the reason why Esau initially was not willing to take what Jacob has given to him.

The size or amount of Jacob's gift is also noteworthy. On the one hand, the amount of this gift may simply indicate that Jacob has acknowledged that he has inflicted great mental and physical damage on Esau by having usurped Esau's birthright and the blessing.[520] On the other hand, Jacob's gift-giving to Esau means more than Jacob's gesture of apology to Esau. The nature of Jacob's gift is also close to a vassal's tribute to an overlord. Giving this big gift to Esau is also a way of acknowledging himself as a faithful vassal before Esau.

What is surely most remarkable about Esau in his reunion with Jacob is not the acceptance of Jacob's gift but his extraordinary graciousness and

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[519]Cf. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 344; Sarna, *Genesis*, 229; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 525.

[520]Cf. Hartley, *Genesis*, 282.

forgiveness. His initial refusal of a gift can be understood that Esau unconditionally does not care much about Jacob's wrong deeds regardless of Jacob's gift. When Esau has met his long-lost brother after twenty years, accepting a gift is anything but important to him. What happened twenty years ago does not concern Esau any more. Esau never asks for an apology from Jacob, who has outrageously deceived him. Is there any more brotherly behaviour in the whole Bible?

One may think that Joseph could be another candidate. However, Joseph did not simply forgive his brothers. His brothers had to go through emotional pain by Joseph's testing.[521] On the contrary, Esau moves readers deeply by accepting and forgiving his cunning brother Jacob unconditionally. The narrator's characterisation of Esau in the end of the Esau-Jacob narrative clearly corresponds to a lofty characterisation. Esau is portrayed in a morally exemplary manner and certainly an educative role model for readers.

4. Esau's Face, God's Face

When Esau was approaching Jacob, Jacob sent servants (messengers) for the second time[522] with flocks and a message that these flocks belong to Jacob and they are the gift sent to Esau (cf. Gen. 32:16-21 [MT 32:17-22]). Each servant was instructed to address Esau as lord and to refer to Jacob as servant. Jacob's tactic seems to appease Esau by giving him the flocks,

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[521] While Claus Westermann claims that a severe trial is required for true reconciliation, Laurence A. Turner questions the necessity of Joseph's testing his brothers before reconciliation. Turner compliments Esau's generosity more than Joseph's: "An immediate (unspoken) pardon was Esau's response to a brother who had cheated him, and this resulted in a true reconciliation. It would be unfair to demand that Joseph act in exactly the same manner as Esau, but ch. 33 shows that testing, trial, and confession are not a necessary route to reconciliation. Esau has shown a better way." See Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 107; Turner, *Announcements of Plot*, 159.

[522] Previously (cf. Gen. 32:3 [MT 32:4]), Jacob sent *messengers* (מלאכים) but there is no doubt that these men are also Jacob's *servants*.

accompanied by the respectful words for Esau several times. Jacob hopes that this gesture would make Esau accept him (cf. Gen. 32:20 [MT 32:21]). More literally, Jacob expects Esau to *lift up his [Jacob's] face.* Most English translations (e.g. NASB, RSV, NIV, NRSV, NKJ, GNV, etc.) translate יִשָּׂא פָנָי as "and he [Esau] will accept (or receive) me", but Gen. 32:20 [MT 32:21] literally reads:

כִּי־אָמַר אֲכַפְּרָה פָנָיו בַּמִּנְחָה הַהֹלֶכֶת לְפָנָי וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן אֶרְאֶה פָנָיו אוּלַי יִשָּׂא פָנָי׃ *for he said, "I will cover his face [Esau's face] with the present that goes before my face, and afterwards I will see his face, [and] perhaps he will lift up my face."*

In Jacob's words here, the word "face" is repeated four times. The "face" is a crucial motif used in the scenes where Esau and Jacob meet again. Jacob is not simply going to meet Esau. As noted in Gen. 32:20 [MT 32:21], he is going to see *Esau's face.*

A possible implication of Jacob seeing Esau's face is to find out whether Esau still bears any grudge against Jacob in his face. If Jacob cannot find any anger in his brother's face, then Jacob can expect that Esau will lift up the face of Jacob himself. Lifting up one's face literally means that two people will have a "face to face" gaze. Given that one's face is not lifted up, his or her face must be positioned lower than the other person who is to lift up the face. What implication Jacob has intended by saying that *he [Esau] will lift up my [Jacob's] face* is not certain, but surviving after seeing Esau (or being forgiven) would be the possible implications that Jacob hoped for result.[523]

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[523]Many Genesis commentators have understood lifting up one's face as *forgiving* or *accepting* someone. See Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 326; Waltke, *Genesis*, 444; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 292; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 510. However, *lifting up one's face* in other instances in the Hebrew Bible does not necessarily connote accepting, receiving or forgiving (cf. 2 Sam 2:22; Ezra 9:6; Job 11:15; 22:16). Except Gen. 32:20 [MT 32:21], we also do not have any example of one person lifting up the face of another. The expression such as "the LORD lift up His face upon you" connotes blessing and restoring, but it is possible that the expression "he will lift up my face" probably means nothing any more than Esau seeing (or meeting) Jacob. For Jacob who has stolen the blessing

When Jacob receives a warm welcome from his brother Esau (Gen. 33:10), Jacob states that *seeing the face of Esau is like seeing the face of God* (רָאִיתִי פָנֶיךָ כִּרְאֹת פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים). What does Jacob mean by saying this? Is Jacob flattering Esau here? Genesis commentators such as S. R. Driver, Hermann Gunkel, and Nahum M. Sarna comment that this could be Jacob's flattery or high compliment to Esau.[524] From Esau's point of view, this could be nothing but flattery or compliment. From Jacob's point of view, however, this could be also closely related with his previous experience at the ford of the Jabbok which Esau himself knows nothing about.[525]

After Jacob's wrestling match with the mysterious man at the Jabbok, Jacob named that place Peniel (פְּנִיאֵל) ,*face of God*, for Jacob, according to his own interpretation, has seen God face to face[526] yet his life is preserved (Gen. 32:30 [MT 32:31]).[527] Jacob may also be better to avoid seeing the face of Esau, because he may die if Esau still bears a grudge against him. In regard to Jacob's meetings with the mysterious man at the Jabbok and Esau, Victor P. Hamilton interestingly comments: "The surprise in ch. 32 is that Jacob saw God, and yet his life is spared. The surprise in ch. 33 is that Jacob has seen Esau, and yet his life is spared."[528] Esau's face is what Jacob dares to see, like seeing the face of God. He needs to be brave enough to face Esau's face.

of his brother and fled away from the death threat of his brother, the best that Jacob expected could be sparing his life by saying that Esau will lift up his [Jacob's] face.

[524]For example, Gunkel comments, "ancient Israelites were accustomed to the inferior making flattering comparison between the superior and God; 2 Sam. 14:17." See Gunkel, *Genesis*, 355; Cf. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 298; ; Sarna, *Genesis*, 230.

[525]Hartley, *Genesis*, 289; Skinner, *Genesis*, 414.

[526]The plural form is used in Masoretic Text.

[527]According to a Hebrew world-view, no one should see the face of God because Hebrews believed that they would die if they see the face of God (cf. Exod. 24; Exod. 33:7-11; 1 Kgs 19:9-21). There is a cosmological distance between the human and the divine in the Hebrew mindset.

[528]See Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 346.

In citing Hamilton's comment, R. Christopher Heard states that "Readers who notice this connection may well decide that Jacob's comparison of Esau with God is less a compliment to Esau than a sign of relief from Jacob."[529] However, it means more than just a sign of relief from Jacob. Jacob's comparison of the face of Esau with the face of God is very remarkable. More interpretative questions can be raised. What is the face of God like? Did Jacob actually see the face of his mysterious opponent at the Jabbok? Is Jacob saying that Esau's face is like the face of the mysterious man at the Jabbok? What is the face of Esau like? Does Esau exude any divine luminescence?

At least one thing is clear. The Genesis narrator is not hostile to Esau and certainly portrays him favourably. Although Jacob's compliment to Esau is mainly Jacob's view, the Genesis narrator is also comfortable speaking through Jacob's mouth that seeing the face of Esau, the eponymous ancestor of the Edomites, is like seeing the face of God. The face of Esau, in whatever way it did, represented the face of God to Jacob. Jacob's expression *seeing the face of Esau is like seeing the face of God* could imply that Jacob stands in awe of Esau just as Hebrews are afraid of seeing the face of God and stand in awe of their God.

5. Re-thinking Reconciliation of Brothers

Many Genesis commentators tend to assume that Jacob's meeting with Esau is a reconciliation between brothers or the end of the fraternal conflict without deeply questioning the nature of this meeting.[530] Can Jacob's meeting with Esau really be called a reconciliation? Their meeting in some way ended

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[529]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 132.

[530]See Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 339–46; Kidner, *Genesis*, 171; Scullion, *Genesis*, 235–6; Towner, *Genesis*, 231–2; Waltke, *Genesis*, 450–3.

Jacob's extreme fear of Esau, but his fear did not disappear completely. Esau is ready to live or at least stay further with his brother whom he could not meet for over twenty years. Esau wants to be with Jacob. He does not want to let Jacob out of his sight. Esau thus suggests that he will accompany Jacob (Gen. 33:12). Initially, what Esau says to Jacob is not to go to *Seir*. It is just to take a journey and he will go before Jacob, thus offering a form of protection for Jacob. Esau's point is to take a journey together. However, while Jacob is meeting Esau, he still makes himself distant from Esau. Esau's company for Jacob is too close for comfort. When Esau offers to escort Jacob's party, Jacob thus turns down Esau's offer with his flimsy pretext that his children are tender and flocks are tired. Jacob says to Esau that his children and flocks will die if they are overdriven for one day (Gen. 33:13). However, Esau himself does not tell Jacob to go to Seir in one day. It is Jacob who assumes that they will go to Seir *in one day*, and it is also Jacob who mentions Seir.[531]

Why would Esau object to travelling at a slower pace if Jacob wants him to do so? Esau's other suggestion to leave some of his men is also a burden to Jacob. The escort from Esau's men will match the pace of Jacob's family, but the fact that Jacob also does not accept Esau's second offer of escort shows that it is not the weakness of children and flocks but Jacob's desire to avoid Esau (or his mistrust of Esau) that motivates Jacob. As von Rad puts it, it is "the mistrust of one who himself has often deceived."[532] At heart, Jacob wanted to avoid going with Esau or his people. The escort either by Esau or his men is the last thing Jacob wants. Jacob wants Esau to be out of sight and out of mind. He knows that Esau is not angry with him at the moment they met after twenty years. Jacob, however, may worry about what

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[531]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 131.

[532]von Rad, *Genesis*, 328; Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 355; Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born*, 106; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 299.

may happen in the near future, if Esau does not forgive him completely. He just wants to run away from Esau.[533]

Turning down Esau's offers, Jacob promises to follow Esau to Seir (Gen. 33:14) but then heads to Succoth which is not located on the way to Seir.[534] As several Genesis commentators interpret it as another example of Jacob's deception,[535] Jacob is still portrayed as a liar. Even though Jacob's name was changed after his divine encounter at the ford of the Jabbok, this incident did not change his personality at all at this very moment of his encounter with Esau. However, interpreters who favour Jacob still defend Jacob's action here. The rabbinic interpretations are typically pro-Jacob,[536] and many traditional and modern interpreters also read this incident in defence of (or in favour of) Jacob. For example, John Hartley comments that Jacob's statement can be better understood as "a polite refusal of Esau's offer with both brothers realising that Jacob would never make it to Seir."[537] Hartley further defends Jacob's deeds by saying that "It was crucial for him [Jacob] to withstand Esau's friendly overtures in order that he might return to and settle in the land of Canaan in accordance with God's promise to Abraham."[538] In line with Hartley, Wenham also suggests this kind of theological reason: Jacob, according to the LORD's instruction, returns to his homeland of

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[533]Maybe, Jacob knows what he would have done in the same circumstances — the deceiver cannot trust the honest man.

[534]Succoth is located westward from where Jacob met Esau, while Seir is located southward. Cf. Harry Thomas Frank, ed., *Atlas of the Bible Lands* (Maplewood: Hammond, 1990), 11.

[535]Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 272; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 348; Cf. Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*, 134.

[536]See Genesis Rabbah 78:14-15. "Surely it is not possible that the upright Jacob should have deceived him." "But when will he come to him in point of fact? It will be in the age to come: 'And saviors shall come up on Mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau' (Ob. 1:21)." For further discussion, see Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 134–5.

[537]Hartley, *Genesis*, 289–90.

[538]Hartley, *Genesis*, 290.

Canaan, which does not include Seir (cf. Gen. 31:3, 13; Gen. 32:10).[539] A traditional commentator such as John Calvin suggested that Jacob distrusts Esau because he does not want new occasions of offence from Esau who can be easily exasperated by light causes.[540]

All of these interpretations are primarily based on the interpreters' attempt to read Jacob favourably,[541] and they are speculative and contain a theological perspective that cannot be strongly supported by textual evidence. The Esau-Jacob narrative never indicates that Jacob's motivation to move to Succoth is to return to the land of Canaan in accordance with God's promise to Abraham or Jacob himself. In the narrative context, his more urgent motivation is likely to get away from Esau's sight as soon as possible. After departing from Esau, he comes to live in Succoth and Shechem. However, after all, neither Succoth nor Shechem was an ideal place that Jacob should arrive. What happened there was the rape of Dinah and the massive slaughter of the Shechemite people by Levi and Simeon (cf. Genesis 34). Right after this incident, God tells Jacob to go to Bethel and dwell there (cf. Gen. 35:1). If Jacob had to return to the land of Canaan according to his previous vow before God (cf. Gen. 28:20-22), he could have moved directly to Bethel instead of sojourning at Succoth and Shechem. Running away from Esau and settling down at Shechem was not a good decision in the end. Jacob needed to stand strong in front of Esau, but he could not. He becomes a timid patriarch who runs away from his brother, the ancestor of the Edomites.

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[539]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 299.

[540]John Calvin, *Genesis* (Repr.; trans. John King; Avon: The Bath Press, 1992), 211. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 299.

[541]See also Peter Lockwood's comment: "There is nothing playful about this deft manoeuvre. He knows of Esau's malicious plans and makes good his escape at the first opportunity. The encounter between Jacob and Esau is fraught with danger from beginning to end. It is little wonder that the author should observe that Jacob finally arrived in the city of Shechem safely (*salem*, v.18)." Lockwood, "Brothers at Peace, Brothers at War," 7.

When Esau returns to Seir that day, does Esau know that Jacob will not follow him? Is Esau deceived again by his brother? Commentators such as John Hartley state that Esau left for Seir, realising Jacob's intention to go his own way,[542] but this is not clearly implied by the narrative. I have shown several interpretations which defend Jacob's lie in regard to his promise to follow Esau to Seir, but interpreters who favour Jacob may even suggest that Jacob did not deliberately deceive Esau. R. Christopher Heard offers a very interesting suggestion that Jacob's settlement in Succoth would be related to Jacob's disability caused by the mysterious man at the Jabbok rather than to a calculating attempt at deceit.[543] Heard comments:

> Many readers find it easy to read chapter 33 without thinking about Jacob's injury at the end of chapter 32. If, however, that injury were rather severe, then Jacob's desire not to travel with Esau immediately, and his refusal of an escort provided by Esau, might not be motivated by a suspicious fear of Esau but rather by pride. On this reading, Jacob realizes that his injury will make travel difficult. Being too proud to admit his own disability, he appeals to the pace of the children and young animals. Esau is willing to accommodate their pace, but Jacob refuses this too, realizing that his disability will be discovered if the companies travel together for long as his own pace will have to be even slower than that of the children and young animals.[544]

This is also another typical example of what most interpreters prefer: a favourable and defensive reading of Jacob. It is likely that Jacob could be permanently disabled or at least temporarily disabled at the time he meets his

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[542]Hartley, *Genesis*, 290.

[543]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 132.

[544]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 132.

brother right after wrestling with the mysterious man.[545] However, this cannot justify Jacob's deceit of Esau (or Jacob's intention to avoid Esau). Heard attributes Jacob's motivation of refusing Esau's escort to Jacob's pride, but this explanation is not quite convincing. If Jacob could not admit his disability because of his pride, how could such a proud Jacob bow down seven times before Esau? It is also possible that Jacob's disability could be already observable to Esau. For limping Jacob, bowing down seven times must be not easy to do naturally. It is more likely the reason why Esau suggests Jacob to accompany his party. His second offer of leaving some of his men could be also related to Jacob's disability. Even if Heard's reading can be regarded as plausible, it is still ironic that Esau is seemingly deceived by Jacob again on the day he meets Jacob again after twenty years.

Throughout the scene where Jacob meets Esau in Genesis 33, Jacob is at odds with Esau. It is hard to regard their meeting as a reconciliation. From Esau's point of view, this may be a reconciliation. What happened twenty years ago does not matter to Esau any more. We have no picture of Esau bearing any grudge against Jacob here. However, from Jacob's point of view, this could be no more than a meeting which is the last thing that he wants to face.[546] Esau desired to stay with Jacob, but Jacob does not want it. Esau accepted Jacob's gift, but Jacob does not want any gift from Esau. Esau wept when he met Jacob after a long separation, but it is doubtful whether Jacob did

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[545]Heard suggests plausible evidence. Heard comments, "Moreover, a permanent disability, rather than a minor inconvenience, resulting from Jacob's wrestling at Peniel could explain other features of Genesis' narrative, such as Jacob's relative lack of action after Shechem's humiliation of Dinah (Genesis 34), his apparent lack of involvement with shepherding his own flocks (Genesis 37), his failure to journey to Egypt himself to obtain food (Genesis 42), and the fact that Jacob is carried to Egypt in a wagon when he finally does journey there (Genesis 46)." See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 132.

[546]Commentators such as E. A. Speiser and David W. Cotter call Jacob's reunion with Esau a meeting rather than a reconciliation. Cf. Cotter, *Genesis*, 249–50; Davidson, *Genesis 12–50*, 188–90; Speiser, *Genesis*, 258–61.

too. He seemed to be calculating how to run away from Esau while he is meeting with Esau. Jacob's meeting with Esau, from the narrative plot, is a climax which has been long anticipated. The narrative tension is resolved by Esau's warm attitude toward Jacob, but their meeting itself is too brief for brothers who met each other after twenty years. It does not seem to take more than ten minutes for their meeting. They do not talk much. They do not have a meal together.[547] They do not spend a day together, talking about what they have been doing for twenty years. Jacob has told Esau briefly about his twenty years, but we as readers have no idea what Esau has been doing over twenty years.

When Jacob left Esau, he did not erect any boundary stone as he did with Laban (Gen. 31:51-54). He has just gone out of Esau's sight. According to Gen. 35:29 when Isaac died at the age of 180, Jacob meets Esau again and they bury their father Isaac together (cf. Gen. 35:29). We are, however, not told whether Jacob and Esau ever met together before their father's funeral. Gen. 35:29 may imply that at least they have kept in touch. Otherwise, it would not be possible for them to meet together and bury their father Isaac. Nevertheless, it is not likely that they have maintained a warm and close relationship, judging from their odd meeting in Genesis 33.[548]

What is remarkable in the last comment on the meeting of Esau and Jacob in Gen. 35:29 is that the narrator placed Esau's name first[549] (thus "Esau and Jacob") as I have done throughout the present study. The reason why the narrator mentioned the name Esau first is not clear from the narrative. As

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[547]See Cotter, *Genesis*, 251.

[548]Regarding Gen. 35:29, R. Christopher Heard comments that Esau and Jacob were able to relate each other peaceably by the time they bury Isaac together. See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 133.

[549]Cf. Cotter, *Genesis*, 260.

Heard points out, it may hint that Esau took the initiative in preparing burial for Isaac.[550] As I have always kept mentioning Esau's name first in advance of Jacob to emphasise Esau's status as older brother due to my favouritism to Esau, it is also possible that our narrator placed Esau's name first here to emphasise Esau's status as a firstborn[551] or to remind readers that Esau was Isaac's favourite son.

6. Concluding Remarks: Why are There Few Political Interpretations of Genesis 32-33?

Although there have been numerous attempts to interpret the Esau-Jacob narrative as political stories of Israel and Edom based on the divine oracle (cf. Genesis 25) and Isaac's blessings (cf. Genesis 27),[552] there have been few political interpretations of Esau's reunion with Jacob in Genesis 32-33.[553] Thus, Frank Crüsemann comments, "While the testimony of chaps. 25 and 27 about the individuals Jacob and Esau is related to the political history of their descendants, the end of the narrative with its account of the reconciliation of the brothers almost always lacks a political interpretation, nor is it related to the beginning of the story."[554] Going beyond Crüsemann, I

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[550]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 133.

[551]Cf. Cotter, *Genesis*, 260.

[552]For example, many Genesis commentators simply take the divine oracle as predicting the subjugation of Edom to Israel in the Davidic period. Casting off the yoke in Isaac's blessing for Esau (Gen. 27:40) is often understood as predicting the liberation of Edom in the days of Johoram of Judah (2 Kgs 8:20-22). Cf. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 381; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 443.

[553]Frank Crüsemann comments on this well, "In previously scholarly studies, the political aspects of the Jacob-Esau narrative have hardly ever been applied to the whole of the composition." See Crüsemann, "Dominion, Guilt, and Reconciliation," 70. As Crüsemann acknowledges, however, Erhard Blum's work may be considered exceptional. Blum is one of the few who has attempted to understand politically the whole of the Jacob story. See Erhard Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984), 175, 185.

[554]Crüsemann, "Dominion, Guilt, and Reconciliation," 70.

suggest more specifically that there are few political interpretations of the humiliating nature of Jacob's portrayal and the honourable nature of Esau's character. While many historical-critical scholars are eager to explain the divine oracle and Isaac's blessings politically, they do not interpret the humiliating portrayal of Jacob such as calling Esau a lord or bowing down before Esau seven times politically. They do not interpret Esau's warm welcome of prodigal Jacob, forgiving him, and offering an escort for Jacob politically. If the Esau-Jacob narrative was primarily written to explain the political situation between Israel and Edom retrospectively, there should be an explanation about why the narrator humiliates Jacob and honours Esau in Genesis 32 and 33. However, we do not have a political interpretation for such a narrative situation.[555] Political reading of certain parts of the narrative such as the divine oracle (Gen. 25:23) and Isaac's blessings (Gen. 27:27-29; Gen. 27:39-40) may be possible, but the political reading of the whole Esau-Jacob narrative is not inevitable and is almost impossible.

Compared with other episodes about Esau, Genesis commentators and scholars do not interpret the episode of Esau's reunion with Jacob in such a negative or polemical way. However, there still exists a certain level of negative assumptions and skepticism about Esau's characteristics shown in this episode. Although Esau as a patriarchal figure emerges as more humane, appealing, and honourable than Jacob, Genesis commentators and scholars have still doubted the good characteristics of Esau such as his leadership, lordship, and gracious character. In this chapter, I have shown how positively and favourably the depictions of Esau in his reunion with Jacob can be read by

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[555]If the political reading of the Esau-Jacob narrative is inevitable, we can assume that Edom's political attitude toward Israel was similarly very friendly and gracious. As Esau ran to Jacob, fell on his neck, kissed him, and wept with him, we can also assume that Edom's posture toward Israel was friendly and gracious.

criticising unfounded negative interpretations of Esau's characteristics. Unlike Genesis commentators and scholars who have not eagerly highlighted positive and honourable characteristics of Esau, I have offered a reading which interprets these favourable characteristics to their maximum. Esau can be certainly considered a more favourable character than Jacob: Characteristically, positive characteristics are not attributed to Jacob.

Chapter 6

Esau's Promised Land, Esau's Descendants (Genesis 36)

Genesis is a book whose plot is genealogy.[556]

As previously discussed, our Genesis narrator has handled Esau favourably and respectfully throughout the narrative. At the time of losing his birthright, Esau is presented with touching feeling. He is presented honourably at the time of meeting Jacob again. Now in Genesis 36, the narrator tells us about Esau's genealogy exhaustively along with the story of Esau's moving to Seir (Gen. 36:6-8) and Anah's finding a יְמִם , *spring*,[557] in the wilderness (Gen. 36:24). Esau's genealogical information in Genesis 36, however, has not drawn much attention from Genesis commentators. There are several Genesis commentaries which explain the names in Genesis 36 in detail, but a majority of Genesis commentaries tend to skip this chapter as if there is no significant information left there.[558] R. Christopher Heard's comment that the long genealogy "does not seem to provide much in the way of additional characterization of Esau" shows a typical scholarly opinion on Esau's genealogy in Genesis 36.[559] There is a scholarly tendency to overlook Esau's genealogy and in many ways this clearly shows another example of an unfavourable reading of Esau. Furthermore, many Genesis commentators

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[556]Naomi Steinberg, "The Genealogical Framework of the Family Stories in Genesis," *Semeia* 46 (2006): 41.

[557]The meaning of this Hebrew word is dubious. It is only used in Gen. 36:14.

[558]For example, Laurence A. Turner, Karel A. Deuroo, and David W. Cotter do not spare many pages in their commentaries concerning Esau's genealogical information.

[559]R. Christopher Heard further comments, "Its chief function may be to provide a sense of Edomite continuity right down to the narrator's present. That is, by listing several generations of Esau's descendants, the narrator may suggest that Esau's descendants continue to be a significant factor in the lives of Jacob's descendants, among whom the narrator may be (self-referentially) included." See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 136.

emphasise the contrast between Genesis 36 and the previous narrative caused by seemingly different versions of Esau's migration to Seir (cf. Genesis 32-33; Gen. 36:6-8), and they ascribe Genesis 36 to a different source from the previous story.[560] However, what makes this contrast even bigger is negative assumptions about Esau on the part of Genesis commentators. Their negative assumptions also cause their indifference to the positive role of Esau as the founder of a kingly line shown by Esau's genealogical information in Genesis 36.

Genesis 36 may be one of the least readable texts in the Esau-Jacob narrative because it offers modern readers a long list of unfamiliar proper names which do not ring any bell. Why then does the Genesis author include so many names in the last part of the Esau-Jacob narrative? Does it simply function as an appendix or footnote about which even ancient readers did not care much? For some reason — whatever it would be — the author made a decision to record this long list of the names within the narrative. We can reasonably conclude that the author must have included it because this genealogical information was valuable to preserve and there was a public who were aware of this information. The names in Genesis 36 and the story of Esau moving into Seir are likely to be related to the common experience of the first audience of the Esau-Jacob narrative.

While the names in Genesis 36 might be significant information for the first audience, my intention in the present chapter is not to explain every name in the list exhaustively. Many of these proper names have already lost their mnemonic function in the course of time. For a reader who is no longer familiar with these names, it is a daunting task to discuss all of these names in

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[560]Many Genesis commentators believe that Genesis 36 is supplied by P. Cf. Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 313–4; Skinner, *Genesis*, 430.

detail, and it is also beyond the scope of the present study.[561] In line with the overall purpose of this research, the purpose of this chapter is primarily to discuss how this list of names and brief narrative in Genesis 36 can affect readers' construction of the narrative portrayal of Esau. Instead of discussing all the names in detail, I will discuss what these names as a whole tell us about Esau and his descendants. Although several prominent commentators such as Claus Westermann, Victor P. Hamilton, and Gordon J. Wenham[562] have elaborated on the names in Genesis 36, they have not properly emphasised the positive and favourable nature of Esau's genealogy along with the Edomite king list. The names in Genesis 36 are mainly about Esau's family and his descendants, but Genesis commentators have overlooked the significance of this.

It is my contention that this long list of names and brief narrative on Esau's migration to Seir clearly shows the narrator's positive and favourable attitude toward Esau and his descendants. Esau's genealogy in Genesis 36 is more than a genealogy. It is another supplementary story to the Esau story in which we can grasp the narrator's favourable description of Esau. In the following pages, I will explain this by examining the significance of Esau moving to Seir, Esau's genealogy, and the list of Edomite kings.

1. Dwelling in Seir: Gaining a New Promised Land?

Gen. 36:6-8 Then Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all his household, and his livestock and all his cattle and all his goods which he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to

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[561]Gerda Hoekveld-Meijer, in her monograph *Esau: Salvation in Disguise*, has extensively and even creatively studied the names in Genesis 36. For those who are interested in the names in Genesis 36, see Hoekveld-Meijer, *Esau: Salvation in Disguise*, 91–121, 205–30.

[562]See Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 390–402; Sarna, *Genesis*, 247–53; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 332–42; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 561–9.

[another] land away from the face of his brother Jacob. For their property had become too great for them to live together, and the land where they sojourned could not sustain them because of their livestock. So Esau lived in the hill country of Seir; Esau is Edom. (My Translation)

Reading Esau's Migration to Seir from a Different Standpoint

Genesis 36 mainly deals with genealogical information, but in Gen. 36:6-8 the narrator briefly tells a story of Esau's leaving the land of Canaan and moving to Seir. From a narratological perspective, Gen. 36:6-8 is a typical passage describing the separation or major moves of clans such as Abraham from Terah (Gen. 12:5), Lot from Abraham (Gen. 13:5-6), and Jacob from Laban (Gen. 31:18).[563] According to Gen. 36:6-8, the reason why Esau moved to Seir is very similar to the reason why Lot moved to the east of the Jordan (Gen. 13:5-6). Just as the possessions of Lot and Abra[ha]m were too great for them to dwell together (Gen. 13:5-6), the possessions of Jacob and Esau are also so great that there is not enough land for them to live together (Gen. 36:7). In brief, the small capacity of the land of Canaan for stock farming caused Esau to leave for Seir. The perception of space here is, however, questionable and ambiguous. By referring to Gen. 34:11, Gordon J. Wenham properly points out the problem of this space perception: "Yet in 34:21 Hamor had said, 'Let them live in the land . . . look the land is big enough for them,' which suggests that however much property Esau really had, there would have been enough room for both Jacob and Esau."[564] As Wenham points out, it is not likely that the land of Canaan is not large enough to sustain the livestocks

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[563]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 337.

[564]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 337.

of only two brothers there.[565] The reason why Esau leaves for Seir is not simply the physical limit of the available space in the land of Canaan. It may be possible that available space for livestock farming was not enough at the time Esau and Jacob lived there even though the actual size of the land was enormous.

However, in either case, the story of Esau's moving to Seir brings certain ambiguities for readers. It is questionable why Esau, not Jacob, decided to leave the land of Canaan. In the case of Lot, besides the small capacity of the land, another reason why Lot left the land of Canaan is that there was strife between the herdsman of Abraham's livestock and the herdsman of Lot's livestock (Gen. 13:7). However, as far as the Esau-Jacob narrative reveals, Esau's migration to Seir is not clearly related to any strife between Esau and Jacob or between the herdsmen of Esau or the herdsmen of Jacob. Esau leaves Canaan without any anger or resentment.[566]

With regard to Esau's moving to Seir in Gen. 36:6-8, several Genesis commentators have interpreted it negatively, regarding it as Esau's *leaving the promised land* with slight variations.[567] For example, Gordon J. Wenham comments, "But like Lot before him, Esau moves out of the land of promise and out of the record of saving history. Probably 37:1 originally followed 36:8,

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[565]According to the biblical tradition, Israelite people lived in Canaan. However, we do not have any account of the small capacity of that land which caused difficulties for the Israelites to live together there.

[566]Relating to the Leviticus rite of atonement, Mary Douglas compares Esau with the goat on which the lot of Lord fell. According to Douglas, Esau "would parallel the bird and the goat not chosen, set free in a remote uncultivated land." Douglas comments, "The analogy between these stories and the two goats on the Day of Atonement is obscured by the Hellenistic focus on guilt carried by the scapegoat. But if we accept the teaching that guilt transferred is guilt expunged, the scapegoat is guiltless, as were Ishmael and Esau. It is important to know that in Genesis each of the escaped persons go free and received honour." See Mary Douglas, *Jacob's Tears: The Priestly Work of Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 55.

[567]See Waltke, *Genesis*, 483–4; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 337; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 563.

deliberately contrasting Esau's exit from Canaan with Jacob's staying put and thereby inheriting the promise."[568] Similarly, Bruce K. Waltke states that "The patriarchs of the holy people, who stake their future on God's promises, move toward the Promised Land (e.g., Abraham, 12:5; Isaac, 26:6; Jacob, 31:18), but the non-elect, who live by sight (i.e., focused on the social, political, and/or economic), not by faith, move away from it (e.g., Lot, 13:5-6, 11-12; Esau, 36:6)."[569] This type of reading of Esau's migration to Seir in many Genesis commentaries certainly reflects the viewpoint focusing on the chosen people only. It shows the scholarly tendency to overlook the narrative role of Esau in the Esau-Jacob story. The positive significance of Esau entering Seir has been overlooked by many Genesis commentators who have interpreted it simply as his leaving the promised land.

From a viewpoint focusing on Esau, the same story of Esau moving to Seir can be also understood differently. I argue that this story can be regarded as *a story of how Esau moved to his own promised land and his descendants prospered there*. As evidence of this, first of all, according to Deuteronomy (cf. Deut. 2:4-5) and Joshua (cf. Josh. 24:4), God Himself says that He has given Mount Seir to Esau.[570] God does not want to give the Israelites any of Esau's land (Deut. 2:5), because God has given it to Esau and his descendants. The Genesis narrator does not explicitly record God's promise to give a land

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[568]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 337.

[569]Waltke, *Genesis*, 483–84.

[570]Deut. 2:4-5 reads, "You will pass through the territory of your brothers the sons of Esau who live in Seir; and they will be afraid of you. So be very careful; do not provoke them, for I will not give you any of their land, even [as little as] a footstep because I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession." (NASB) Cf. Josh. 24:4. Josh. 24:4 reads: "And to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau, and to Esau I gave Mount Seir, to possess it; but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt." (NASB)

to Esau, but Esau's moving to Mount Seir[571] in Gen. 36:6-8, according to the perspective of Deut. 2:4-5 and Josh. 24:4, can be regarded as Esau's entering his own *promised land.* After all, Esau's moving to Seir does not seem to be an unpleasant experience for Esau. In fact, Esau did not have to leave the land of Canaan after Jacob had stolen his blessing. It was Jacob who had to leave the land of promise (cf. Gen. 27:41-28:5) and spend twenty years of his life as a wanderer. While Jacob was in exile, Esau on the contrary was able to remain in the promised land. If there was any privilege to remaining in the land of Canaan, it was Esau, not Jacob, who initially enjoyed such privilege.

Secondly, just as Jacob's descendants conquered the land of Canaan by dispossessing people in that land, Esau's descendants had their own experience of conquering their promised land by dispossessing the Horites who formerly lived in the land of Seir (cf. Deut. 2:12).[572] Although God told

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[571]When Seir refers to the name of an area in the biblical tradition, it points to part of the land of Edom (Gen. 14:6; 36:20-21, 30; Deut. 1:2, 44; 2:1; 33:2; Josh. 11:17; 12:7; Jud. 5:4; Isa. 21:11; 1 Chr. 1:38; 4:42). In the Hebrew Bible, the name *Seir* is often used interchangeably with *Edom*, both in the political and geographical sense (Gen. 32:4; 33:14, 16; 36:8-9; Num. 24:18; Deut. 2:4-5, 8, 12, 22, 29; Josh. 24:4; Ezek. 25:8; 35:2-3, 7, 15; 2 Chr. 20:10, 22-23; 25:11, 14). In Jud. 5:4, "Seir" and "the field of Edom" parallel each other. Seir is often referred to as "the mountain of Seir" or "the mountain" (Gen. 14:6; 36:8-9; Deut. 2:1, etc.) From these biblical references, we can reason that Seir is located in a mountainous area and becomes part of Edom later on (for further discussion, see Ernst Axel Knauf, "Seir," *ABD* 5: 1072–3).

Taking the biblical tradition for granted, scholars often equate the land of Seir with the land of Edom, assuming that these names refer to different aspects of the same land (i.e., Seir referring to the wooded area and Edom to sandstone cliffs). However, scholars such as John R. Bartlett have not equated Seir with Edom. Bartlett has regarded Seir as referring to the southern Negev area west of the Wadi 'Araba. To review various scholarly opinions on the relationship between Seir and Edom, see John R. Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites* (JSOTSup 77; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 41–2.

John R. Bartlett is one of the founding scholars of Edomite research. According to Bartlett, whom I have personally met at the SOTS Summer Meeting in 2006 (Society for Old Testament Studies; Held at Durham), historical evidence through archaeological exploration of Edom is still not enough to reconstruct their past. Cf. Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites*, 7.

[572]In the biblical tradition, *Seir* refers to both *the name of the land* inhabited by the Edomites (or the Horites) and *the name of the eponymous ancestor* of the Horites. According to Gen. 36:30, the sons of *Seir* the Horite were living in the land of Seir, at the same time as the sons of Esau were also presumably living in that land. Deut. 2:12 says that the Horites formerly lived in Seir but the sons of Esau destroyed them and settled in their place. Compared with Genesis 36, Deut. 2:12 has simplified the picture of the conquest of the Horites. When the

Abraham that He will give a land to his descendants (cf. Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8), they did not gain the land without doing anything. They had to dispossess people in the land of Canaan. Likewise, the author of Deuteronomy makes the experience of Esau's descendants analogous to the experience of the Israelites. Esau's descendants also went through the process of expelling the local people from Seir. The way that Esau's descendants gain the land of Seir is very similar to Jacob's descendants gaining their land.

For the above reasons, we can reasonably regard Mount Seir (or the hill country of Seir)[573] as Esau's *promised land.* However, most Genesis commentators do not refer to the land of Seir as Esau's promised land, because their reading of the patriarchal story is biased and focused on the chosen people. They do not take Esau, who is not part of God's covenant, as deserving to be associated with the term "promised land." Is it absurd to refer to the land where Esau lives as Esau's promised land? Is the "promised land" a kind of term that could be used only in relation to those who stand within God's covenant? In the book of Genesis, it is misleading to regard God's promise as only for those who are chosen by God such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In many occasions, God's promise is also for people who stand outside God's covenant in the book of Genesis. For example, just as Abraham received God's promise of seed (זֶרַע , *seed, offspring,* or *descendants*) and nationhood (גּוֹי , *nation*) (cf. Gen. 12:1-3; 13:16; 15:5), God has also given the promise of seed and nation to Hagar and Ishmael. In Gen. 16:7, the angel of God finds Hagar wandering in the wilderness and delivers a message that her seed (or her descendants) will be numerous. Again in Gen. 21:17-18, the angel of God calls Hagar from heaven and promises her that God will make a great nation of her

sons of Esau entered Seir, not all the Horites were annihilated. As the list of Gen. 36:20-30 manifests, several clans of the Horites survived and intermarried with the Edomites.

[573]Cf. Josh. 24:4.

son Ishmael. God also promised Abraham that he will bless Ishmael too (Gen. 17:20). As shown above, our Genesis narrator intensified the promise given to Hagar in the Abraham narrative. The promise motif is also present in relation to those who stand outside God's covenant. Previously, the narrator portrayed Hagar and Ishmael as recipients of God's promise and blessings.[574]

As supported by Hagar and Ishmael's case, God's promise is not restricted to those who are chosen by God. Generally speaking, "promised land" is not a term that we usually use in association with those who are not chosen by God, but this is nothing anymore than scholarly bias. Given that the promise is not only for those who stand within God's covenant, there is no reason to avoid using the term "promised land" in relation to those who have received any land from God.

In fact, "promised land" is not a term that our Genesis narrator preferably used. It is rather a term preferred by contemporary Genesis commentators who often interpret the patriarchal narrative focusing on Abraham, Isaac and Jacob only.[575] In the book of Genesis, the narrator mostly refers to the land of Canaan as *this land*[576] (Gen. 12:7; 15:7, 18), *the land of your sojourning*[577] (Gen. 28:4), *the land which I gave to Abraham*[578] (Gen. 35:12), *the land of your fathers*[579] (Gen. 31:3; 48:21), or *the land of the Hebrews*[580] (Gen. 40:15).

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[574]Besides, Hagar and Ishmael are also noteworthy in terms of being characters who suffer in the wilderness and then meet the angel of God there. The wilderness is a typical place in the Bible where biblical heroes suffer and experience divine presence. Moses is a typical example.

[575]For example, see Waltke, *Genesis*, 483–4; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 337; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 563.

[576]הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת

[577]אֶרֶץ מְגֻרֶיךָ

[578]הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם

[579]אֶרֶץ אֲבוֹתֶיךָ

[580]אֶרֶץ הָעִבְרִים

The narrator does not explicitly mention the word "promised" in relation to land. Furthermore, there is no Hebrew verb that is usually translated into English as *to promise*. The closest Hebrew verb is שָׁבַע , *to swear*. There is only one occasion that this verb is used in association with the land of Canaan in the book of Genesis. When Joseph was about to die, through the mouth of Joseph, the land of Canaan is depicted as "the land which God *swore* to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob"[581] (Gen. 50:24). Other than that, God simply told Abra[ha]m repeatedly that He will *give this land*,[582] which is not clear in its boundary, to Abraham's descendants, and most scholars simply take this land as "promised land." Given that God has said that He has given Mount Seir to Esau (Deut. 2:4-5), we can reasonably take Seir as Esau's *promised land* just as we regard Canaan as Jacob's promised land. Furthermore, in the biblical tradition, Seir is a significant place connected with Yahweh, God of Israel. Biblical references connect Seir with Yahweh. Jud. 5:4 says that Yahweh went out of Seir and marched from the region of Edom. Deut. 33:2 reads that Yahweh rises up (or dawns; וַיִּזְרַח מִשֵּׂעִיר) from Seir. According to these references, Seir is not only Esau's "promised land" but also a place of God's dwelling.

Several Genesis commentators such as Bruce K. Waltke assume that Esau left the land of Canaan, just as Lot or Ishmael did, because he lives by sight, not by faith, and he will not be part of God's promise or blessing.[583] This way of reading is also focused on Jacob only. However, Deut. 2:4-5 and Josh. 24:4 again offer another direction to understand Esau's migration to Seir

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[581] הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב

[582] As I have previously discussed in chapter four, the boundary of *this land* is vague. See pages 167 to 168 of the present study.

[583] For example, Bruce K. Waltke assumes that Esau left the land of Canaan, because he focuses on the social, political, and/or economic situation. See Waltke, *Genesis*, 484. Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 341.

from a different perspective—reading Esau's migration to Seir more favourably. Is not the reason why Esau left for Seir because Esau has received the promise of the land of Seir (or God has already given a land to Esau)? This is not explicitly stated in the book of Genesis and may be regarded as speculative, but it is nevertheless a possible reading of the reason why Esau, not Jacob, left for Seir—Esau is told that God will give him the land of Seir just as Jacob is told that God will give him the land of Canaan. Given that God has given the land of Seir to Esau, we can also understand Esau leaving for the land of Seir as leaving for the land which God will show him, just as Abraham left for a land which God will show him (Gen. 12:4).

Is There Any Literary Solution to the Problem of the Different Versions of Esau's Migration to Seir?

I have suggested that we should read Esau's moving to Seir as Esau's entering his own *promised land.* However, there is still an ambiguity here that needs to be resolved for a favourable reading of Esau's moving to Seir. The ambiguity of Esau's migration to Seir in Gen. 36:6-8 is that it does not seemingly fit well with the previous story that the narrator told. Just as the names of Esau's wives in Genesis 36 are at odds with the names previously told by the narrator (cf. Gen. 26:34; Gen. 28:9), the story of Esau's migration to Seir is also difficult to understand in its narrative context. From the narrative context, it is not clear since when Esau has been living in the land of Seir. As we do not have a clear account of when and how Esau ends up living in the land of Seir, one may ask whether a favourable reading of Esau's migration to Seir as "entering his promised land" can be still validated. Although there is an ambiguity in Esau's move to Seir, it does not strongly weaken my reading of Esau's move to Seir as Esau's entering his own promised land.

Has Esau already been living in the land of Seir before Jacob has returned from his exile as implied in Genesis 32 and 33? Or did Esau leave for Seir after some time of living together with Jacob as implied in Genesis 36? According to Genesis 32 and 33, Esau seems to have been living in Seir by the time Jacob returns after twenty years of sojourn in Laban's house. Gen. 32:3 (MT Gen. 32:4) tells us that Jacob sent his messengers to Esau in the land of Seir. After Esau meets Jacob shortly, Esau returns to Seir (Gen. 33:16). While Genesis 32 and 33 allude to the fact that Esau has been already living in the land of Seir when Jacob returns from Paddan-aram, Gen. 36:6-8 describes Esau as leaving for Seir presumably after some time of living together with Jacob. However, a time period of the two brothers living together here is not clear. Nothing in the Esau-Jacob narrative indicates that Esau and Jacob ever lived together in Canaan since Jacob left Canaan and moved to Paddan-aram. After the brief reunion of Esau and Jacob after twenty years of separation (cf. Genesis 33), the only account of meeting of the two brothers is at the burial of their father (Gen. 35:29).

Chronologically, it is also not clear whether Esau's parting from Jacob in Gen. 36:6-8 comes after (or before) the burial of their father Isaac. We can speculate that Esau and Jacob buried Isaac together while they are living together in Canaan, but burying Isaac together does not necessarily imply that they lived in Canaan together. As long as they could remain in contact with each other, they can meet together for Isaac's funeral. Just as Ishmael could come to his father Abraham's burial regardless of his being expelled from Abraham's family (cf. Gen. 25:9), attending Isaac's funeral together may not mean the two brothers live together. As the Esau-Jacob narrative does not give any definite chronological information, this parting in Gen. 36:6-8 could have taken place much earlier (or later) than Isaac's death. Reading Gen. 36:6-8

thus generates difficulties in figuring out exactly how and when Esau ends up moving to Seir.

Various scholarly opinions have been suggested regarding the ambiguity of Esau's migration to Seir. Genesis commentators who are fond of the documentary hypothesis do not consider harmonising these different versions of Esau's migration to Seir. S. R. Driver and John Skinner, for instance, simply assume that these accounts are from different sources.[584] There are also scholars who regard Gen. 36:6-8 as an ideological statement rather than as an actual description of what happened. For example, Devora Steinmetz points out that the omission of specific place names for the land where Esau went in Gen. 36:6 has "the effect of generalising the narrative and recalling its parallels, when brothers departed to אֶרֶץ קֶדֶם ('the land of the east,' Gen. 25:6), אַרְצָה בְּנֵי־קֶדֶם ('to the land of the sons of the east,' Gen. 29:1), and אֶרֶץ־נוֹד קִדְמַת־עֵדֶן ('the land of Nod east of Eden,' Gen. 4:16)."[585] From a different perspective, R. Christopher Heard suggests another interesting way to understand the contrast between Gen. 36:6-8 and the previous narrative. According to Heard, the contrast here is about *who* left Canaan. Whereas it is *Jacob* who has left Canaan in fear of Esau's revenge in the previous narrative, in Gen. 36:6-8 it is *Esau* who has left Canaan because of the resource management issue in the land.[586] Reasonably, this contrast therefore can raise the question of the reliability of our Genesis narrator. Because of this contrast,

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[584]For example, S. R. Driver assumes that Esau's residence in Edom is already presupposed in J material (e.g. Gen. 32:3, Gen. 33:14, 16), while he believes that Genesis 36 is supplied by P. See Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 313–4. Cf. Skinner, *Genesis*, 430.

[585]See Steinmetz, *From Father to Son*, 182. n. 54. However, as Steinmetz herself also points out, Esau did not move to the land of *east* (קֶדֶם) because Esau's new land is not in the east. As Esau did not move to the land of the *east*, the parallel between Esau's migration and the examples Steinmetz mentioned are not that strong. It is not that easy to generalise as Steinmetz suggested.

[586]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 136.

Heard questions the narrator's reliability and takes up the matter of which version readers should believe. Heard comments that readers who put trust in chapter 28 can hardly believe chapter 36, and vice versa.[587] Heard is also skeptical about harmonising the two different accounts by supposedly relating Genesis 36 to a time period just after the events of Genesis 33, because Heard understands that the narrator describes Esau living in Seir at that point (cf. Gen. 32:3).[588]

Various scholarly opinions introduced above show different types of solutions to resolve the ambiguity of Esau's migration to Seir. As Driver and Skinner point out, is this contrast between Gen. 36:6-8 and the previous narrative caused by different sources to which our narrator did not make any attempt to change? Can this contrast be resolved by any attempt to harmonise these seemingly contradictory accounts? As Heard points out, does this contrast demonstrate the unreliability of the narrator? Those who assume that the Esau-Jacob narrative was written by several hands, will regard this contrast as being caused by multiple authorship. If the Esau-Jacob narrative was not finally edited by a single person, the contrast between these accounts is not improbable. However, from my understanding of the Esau-Jacob narrative, this contrast is not simply about whether we can trust the narrator or not. It is also not simply a matter of regarding one account as more reliable than the other. How and by what criteria could we possibly judge that one account is more reliable than the other? Harmonisation of the two different accounts may not be always recommendable because of the limits of filling the gap by speculation, but we also cannot simply say that harmonisation is useless.

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[587]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 136.

[588]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 136.

Readers who are able to recognise the contrast will react to it in a certain way. Heard comments that "Readers determined to read Genesis 12-36 as a coherent, unified narrative might be able to harmonise the accounts by supposing that 36:7 does not reflect any actual conflict or tension between Jacob and Esau, but instead represents Esau's own reasoning in advance of any such problems."[589] With regard to Gen. 36:6-8, Heard suggests the possibility that Esau could foresee the problems that might happen by the time Jacob returns to Canaan, and moved voluntarily to Seir to avoid any conflict with his brother.[590] As Heard points out, there is nothing to invalidate such a literary reconstruction of the narrative,[591] but at the same time we need to be aware that there is no textual clue to support such a reconstruction. Going beyond Heard's suggestion, we can still understand this contrast without taking Gen. 36:6-8 as Esau's own reasoning.

If we read the patriarchal narrative carefully, relating Esau's migration to Seir in Gen. 36:6-8 to a time period after the reunion between Esau and Jacob (or after the burial of Isaac in Gen. 35:29) does not cause a big problem in understanding it in narrative context. Heard's doubt about Gen. 36:6-8 as the event after the reunion between Esau and Jacob[592] seems to be based on the assumption that Esau's moving to Seir is just a one-time event. In the patriarchal narrative, however, we need to note that our patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob often moved from place to place. Although they preferred to

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[589]See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 136. However, from my point of view, such an attempt to harmonise the two different accounts is not exclusively for readers who are determined to read the Esau-Jacob narrative coherently. Alternatively, we need to consider that there could be also a group of readers who will not simply care about this contrast or regard them as two separate traditions.

[590]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 136.

[591]However, Heard seems to be still sceptical about the credulity of this reconstruction, raising a question that readers might wonder where Esau, the hunter, could possibly get all that livestock. See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 136.

[592]See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 136.

stay in certain places such as the Negeb (Gen. 12:9; 13:1-3; 20:1; 24:62), Beersheba (Gen. 21:14, 31-34; 22:19; 26:23, 33; 28:10; 46:1, 5), and Hebron (Gen. 13:18; 23:2, 19; 35:27; 37:14), they have not lived there permanently without any occasional moves to other places. Based on the journeys of the patriarchs, we therefore need not suppose that Esau moved to Seir at a certain point and stayed there all the time without ever moving to other places such as Canaan. Even if Seir is Esau's primary place of dwelling, we can reasonably conclude that Esau visited Canaan occasionally. Although Esau was in Seir at the time Jacob returns from Paddan-aram, it is possible that Esau has been living in Seir and moving to Canaan back and forth while his father Isaac has been living there.[593] As Esau was Isaac's favourite son (cf. Gen. 25:28; 27:1-4), there is no reason to believe that Esau never stayed or lived with his parents since Jacob has left for Paddan-aram. Esau could have been living in both Seir and Canaan[594] without vacating where Isaac lived. As Esau moved back to Canaan to meet his brother Jacob, it is reasonable to infer that Esau has been visiting his father Isaac while he has been living there. From this reasoning, it is also plausible to infer that Esau's migration to Seir in Gen. 36:6-8 happens some time after Isaac's death. Given that Esau has been visiting and staying with Isaac occasionally while Isaac has been living in Canaan, there may be no reason for him to stay in Canaan any more once his father passed away—unless he could live happily with his brother Jacob. As I have discussed the nature of their reunion in Genesis 33, remaining closely with Esau is the last

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[593]Cf. Bruce K. Walke suggests this kind of possibility. Waltke comments, "To some degree, Esau the nomadic hunter has already occupied Seir prior to Jacob's return to Mamre (32:3; 33:14, 16). Yet he does not vacate the land of his fathers (see 35:29) until Jacob's return." See Waltke, *Genesis*, 483.

[594]According to John Skinner, the exact location could be Hebron. Skinner comments, "The motive for the separation is the same as that which led to the parting of Abraham and Lot (13:6a), implying that Esau had lived at Hebron after Jacob's return; contrast J, 32:4; 33:14, 16)." See Skinner, *Genesis*, 430.

thing Jacob wants. Therefore, Esau's migration to Seir in Gen. 36:6-8 can be interpreted as Esau's returning to Seir again just as he has returned to Seir after his reunion with Jacob near Peniel (cf. Genesis 33). After his meeting with Jacob at their father Isaac's funeral and presumably some time of living together with Jacob, Esau seems to return to Seir again.

In fact, Esau's migration described in Gen. 36:6-8 does not clearly indicate whether Esau moved to Seir *for the first time*. As Esau has already been in Seir according to Genesis 32 and 33, Esau's migration to Seir in Gen. 36:6-8 is not likely his first-time move. Just as our patriarchs moved from place to place in their journey, the last part of Gen. 36:6 does not even mention Seir as the place of Esau's new settlement from the outset. Gen. 36:6 literally reads:וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־אֶרֶץ מִפְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב אָחִיו , *and he [Esau] went to [a] land*[595] *away from the face of Jacob his brother*. In Gen. 36:8, the text indicates that Esau settled in *the land of Seir* but it does not clearly refer to it as the place of Esau's first settlement after he has left from Jacob. I suggest that Esau's migration in Gen. 36:6-8 is not his first time to settle down there. Before Jacob returned from his exile, he may had been living in Seir —but not all the time. Therefore, it is more than likely that Esau is "returning" to his promised land after his father's death.

Regarding seemingly different versions of Esau's migration to Seir in the Esau-Jacob narrative, I have suggested a literary solution which does not regard Esau's migration to Seir as a one-time event. Esau living in Seir does not necessarily mean that he had completely left the land where his father Isaac

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[595]There exist several various textual traditions regarding Gen. 36:6 which attempted to amend the ambiguity here. Samaritan Pentateuch and Septuagint read "he went from the land of Canaan." Targums Onqelos and Jonathan read "he went to another land." Peshita clearly mentions "to the land of Seir." All of these textual traditions show scribal attempts to fill in the gap caused by ambiguous passage on Esau's migration in Gen. 36:6-8. See Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 391. n.6.

has been living and never came back there. It is reasonable to conclude that Esau moved from Seir and Canaan back and forth while Isaac has been living in Canaan. However, I am not suggesting here that this kind of attempt to harmonise is necessary to resolve the ambiguity. However, for those who are more inclined to attempt to harmonise the two seemingly contradictory accounts of Esau's migration to Seir, harmonisation as suggested above is one of the plausible ways to understand this contrast.

As Esau's migration to Seir in Gen. 36:6-8 is ambiguous compared with the previous story, it is not simple to provide any definite literary solution to the different versions of Esau's migration to Seir within the Esau-Jacob narrative.

As I have previously explained with the example of different names of Esau's wives, there is also a possibility that the Genesis author was not so much concerned about the contrast between Esau's migration in Genesis 36 and the previous story. If it did not matter to our Genesis author, every attempt to harmonise this contrast could be simply a modern reader's concern, not the Genesis author's. I do not deny the possibility that the author might have two different traditions about Esau's migration to Seir. Reasonably, the fact that the author did not harmonise it also suggests that he (or she) respected different traditions and it might not be the author's main concern to harmonise it. Although the Esau-Jacob narrative does not clearly tell when and how Esau ends up living in the land of Seir, it does not necessarily jeopardise a favourable reading of Esau's migration to Seir as entering his promised land. Whether it is Esau's first time or second time to move to Seir, it is still his promised land.

2. What Does Esau's Genealogy Tell Readers About Esau?

Genealogy is a record of one's family history. Robert R. Wilson, one of the pioneers in the study of genealogies in the Bible and ancient Near East, defines genealogy as "a written or oral expression of the descent of a person or persons from an ancestor or ancestors."[596] The Hebrew equivalent term for "genealogy" is תּוֹלְדוֹת (hereafter, *toledot*), and this term is generally translated in English as "descendants" (NAB, NJB, NRSV, RSV), "generations" (ASV, JPS, KJV), "genealogy" (NKJ), "account" (NIV) or "line" (TNK). In the Hebrew Bible, there are about 25 genealogies, which, according to Robert R. Wilson, outnumbers any other ancient Near Eastern literature and shows the importance of genealogy in the life and thought of the Israelites.[597] The placement of genealogy in the book of Genesis is even more crucial than other books in the Bible. Traditionally, scholars who approach the book of Genesis from a source-critical perspective attribute the use of the *toledot* formula "these are generations" (אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת) to the Priestly writer.[598] The purpose of using the *toledot* formula has been generally understood to give a literary structure to the narratives. The *toledot* formula often marks the beginning of narratives or genealogies (Gen. 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 37:2).[599] In Genesis 36, we have the *toledot* formula attributed to Esau.

What role does Esau's *toledot* play in the patriarchal narrative? How important is Esau's genealogy, and what does Esau's genealogy tell readers

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[596]Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 9.

[597]Robert R. Wilson, "Genealogy, Genealogies," *ABD* 2: 930.

[598]Driver, *The Book of Genesis*, 313; Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*, 144 ; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 375; Skinner, *Genesis*, 428; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 335; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 562.

[599]According to Frank M. Cross, the *toledot* formula occurs five times introducing genealogies (Gen. Gen. 5:1; 10:1; 25:12; 36:1) and five times introducing narrative sections (Gen. 2:4; 6:9; 11:27; 25:19; 37:2). See Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 372. Quoted from Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*, 143.

about Esau? Many Genesis commentators argue that the placing of Esau's *toledot* (genealogy) in Genesis 36 is consistent with the genealogies of other dis-elected characters: Just as Ishmael's *toledot* (the rejected line) appears before Isaac's *toledot* (the elect line; Gen. 25:19), Esau's *toledot* (the rejected line) appears before Jacob's *toledot* (the elect line; Gen. 37:2).[600] For example, David W. Cotter states that the placement of the dis-elected's genealogy is intended to show the summary of "the life and inheritance of the non-chosen son before moving on to an extended treatment of what happened to the favoured son."[601] However, it is doubtful that the genealogy of Esau is simply intended to show the summary of life and inheritance of the dis-elected. First of all, the amount of information given to Esau's genealogy is too much to be viewed simply as a summary of the life of the dis-elected. If Esau's genealogy is written simply for the purpose of linking between the two major narratives about the chosen sons — namely, Isaac and Jacob — it is far more detailed than it needs to be. Secondly, Cotter's view of favoured sons is simply incorrect. The plot of the Genesis narrative develops toward chosen sons, not favoured sons. Ishmael and Esau have been their father's favourite, not Isaac and Jacob. It is also doubtful that the narrator has favoured the chosen sons only — as the present study has shown, the narrator often shows polemic against those who are chosen.

As evidenced by David W. Cotter's view, scholarly views in regard to Esau's *toledot* have been generally negative, such as viewing Esau's *toledot* simply as the summary of the dis-elected. Esau's *toledot* might function to summarise the life of Esau as a dis-elected at some level, but from a more positive perspective, we can also regard Esau's *toledot* as offering further

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[600]Cf. Alter, *Genesis*, 202; Cotter, *Genesis*, 261; Hartley, *Genesis*, 305; Scullion, *Genesis*, 249–50; Waltke, *Genesis*, 481–2.

[601]Cotter, *Genesis*, 261.

significant information on what happened to Esau afterwards. We can also view Esau's genealogy as joining Isaac's and Jacob's *toledots* as part of the larger Abrahamic family and significant information about Esau's descendants.[602] Even though Esau's genealogy is not the chosen line, the narrator's concern is still with Esau's descendants. After all, Esau is Isaac's favoured son, and Abraham's grandson. If the narrator was not interested in Esau's genealogy, there is no reason to include such a list of Esau's descendants at the final part of the Esau-Jacob narrative. The fact that there is no *toledot* formula attributed directly to Abraham[603] also suggests that the purpose of genealogy is not only to show who are chosen and who are not chosen.

Genesis 36 consists of three *toledot*s, two of Esau and one of Seir the Horite. It also contains the lists of kings and chiefs. As Gordon J. Wenham points out, genealogies do not easily evoke any theological reflection but they have an important function in terms of tracing Israel's or its neighbour's ancestral line.[604] Esau's genealogy is significant in that this is the *longest* genealogical information given in the book of Genesis. The list of Esau's descendants has been equally and thoroughly documented as much as genealogical information given for Jacob's descendants (Gen. 46:8-27). Among the forsaken firstborns, it is only Esau's genealogical information which is thoroughly dealt with by the narrator. For example, the genealogy of Ishmael has been documented to a lesser degree (Gen. 25:12-28).

Why, then, is there this long list of names for Esau's descendants in the book of Genesis? The reason for this inclusion is unclear. Is it simply

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[602]Hoekveld-Meijer, *Esau: Salvation in Disguise*, 3. Cf. Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 181.

[603]Instead of Abraham, the *toledot* formula was applied to his father Terah (Gen. 11:27).

[604]Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 341.

preserved for historiographic purposes? Or is it derived from Israel's interest in Edom as a twin brother? For some reason — whatever it may be — Esau's genealogy, along with the lists of Edomite kings and chiefs, is included in the book of Genesis. Modern readers may think that the names in Genesis 36 form nothing more than the list of names. However, the question is, if this list is not significant information at all, why the Genesis author included such information in the book of Genesis.

With regard to the above question, scholars have offered various opinions. Gerda Hoekveld-Meijer says that the author wrote Genesis 36 for an audience who knew the history of Edom and that the names in Genesis 36 must have been associated with a common experience at the time although "they lose their mnemonic function in the course of time."[605] Claus Westermann suggests that this list was necessary for the purpose of the Davidic administration to have an exact knowledge of Edomite people, their land and history after the conquest of Edom.[606] In line with scholars such as Gary A. Rendsburg[607] and P. Dhorme,[608] Westermann also suggests that as a result of David's conquest of Edom the king list of Edom from the chancery of Edom came into the kingdom of David.[609]

The question is not easy to answer. Westermann's suggestion is somewhat speculative, but I believe that no one can give a clear explanation as

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[605]Hoekveld-Meijer, *Esau: Salvation in Disguise*, 2.

[606]Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 561.

[607]Gary A. Rendsburg comments, "Returning to Edom for a moment, we naturally should refer to 36:1-43 with its detailed material on Esau's descendants and the Edomite kings. Such a list, most certainly of Edomite origin or at least based on material of Edomite origin, would have been incorporated into Israelite literature at a time when Israel had domain over Edom, again during the Davidic-Solomonic empire." See Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1986), 109–10.

[608]P. Dhorme, "Palmyre dans les Textes Assyriens," *RB* 33 (1924): 106–8.

[609]Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 561.

to how the list of Esau's genealogy in Genesis 36 comes to the hand of the Genesis author and becomes part of the book of Genesis. Westermann explains why Esau's genealogical information was included from an *Israelite* point of view—for the purpose of Israelite administration—not from an Edomite point of view. He has not explained how Esau's genealogy might function within Edomite society. Robert R. Wilson insists that the individual genealogies in Genesis 36 do not play any role "in the literary function of the chapter as a whole", and that they "once functioned outside of their present context."[610] Wilson also suggests that these individual genealogies in Genesis 36 were "used as mnemonics of the Edomite lineages functioning in various contexts."[611] Wilson's proposal is plausible, but it still does not explain what purpose the mnemonics for the Edomite lineage or Esau's genealogy had at the time. I agree with the position that there is a possibility that the individual genealogies in Genesis 36 once functioned outside the narrative context of Genesis 36, but there is still nothing we could know for sure about any hypothetical context other than the present one. If there is one thing we can suggest for sure about Esau's genealogy, it would be that it must have been seen as useful information for the audience at the time from the author's point of view. If this was not important information, it would have not easily been preserved.

Narrative Function of Genealogies

Genesis 36 is, in its nature, close to genealogy (though, there are still narrative components in Genesis 36). Most of the Esau texts, however, are written in the form of the *narrative*. How, then, does Esau's genealogy in

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[610]Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 182.

[611]Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 182.

Genesis 36 work in relation to previous narrative? Generally, how does genealogy function in the book of Genesis? Naomi Steinberg, in her article "The Genealogical Framework of the Family Stories in Genesis", states that "Genesis is a book whose plot is genealogy" and that "narrative serves as a transitional device between genealogies."[612] Steinberg comments:

> In the book of Genesis, genealogy expresses the ideal stable succession for any family wishing to continue its lineage into the future. Moving from one generation to another is one way for literature to indicate the passage from one stage of family equilibrium to another. Thus, rather than seeing genealogy only as later redactional additions by P with no intrinsic relationships to the narratives which they now shape, I am arguing that, in a family setting such as the stories in Genesis suggest, the family relationships expressed through the genealogies are the point of continuity.[613]

As Steinberg points out, genealogy continues a story of a family through family relationships expressed there. Discussing the genealogies of Shem, Ishmael, and Esau, Steinberg suggests that "their histories are provided in their genealogies and thus their genealogies are their stories."[614] Although historio-critical scholars would not agree on the nature of genealogy as history, I agree with Steinberg that genealogy functions as a *story*—more specifically, I would suggest that genealogy functions as a supplementary story or a lateral biography. Genesis 36 functions as a supplementary story or a lateral biography of Esau.[615] Esau's genealogy gives the readers another story of Esau begetting sons and his family line prospering afterwards. Esau's genealogy shows a story of how Esau's generation ends and moves to the next

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[612]Steinberg, "The Genealogical Framework," 41.

[613]Steinberg, "The Genealogical Framework," 43.

[614]Steinberg, "The Genealogical Framework," 44.

[615]On this point, this type of storytelling is also similar to Icelandic Sagas. In the Icelandic Sagas, when a character drops out of the main story, there is often a digression to discuss this character's fate and his descendants before another main story resumes.

generation. This is more than a summary. It is a supplementary story for those who are still interested in what happened to Esau afterwards.

With regard to genealogies in Genesis 36, Robert R. Wilson understands that they were included "purely for historiographic purposes."[616] I suggest to go beyond Wilson's point: Esau's genealogy was included because *it is worth recording and making known to the readers.* If it was not worthy to preserve as historiographic data, there is no reason to waste rolls of scroll to record the long list of Esau's descendants. Therefore, the inclusion of Esau's genealogy has more than a purely historiographic purpose. It is also more than the summary of the life of the non-chosen son and the link between the two narratives of the chosen sons. The narrator has provided another favourable story of Esau's life through showing his genealogy. Esau's genealogy is at the final part of the Esau-Jacob story and the long list of names may easily be skipped by modern readers. However, although Esau's genealogy is not written in a narrative form, it still conveys another story that we have not heard of Esau in the previous narrative.

3. What Does the List of Kings in Edom Tell Readers about Esau?

> *These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned for the Israelites (Gen. 36:31 My Translation).*[617]

In the third major section of Genesis 36 (Gen. 36:31-39), there is the list of kings in Edom. In detail, this list goes over eight generations, starting from Bela and ending with Hadar (or Hadad).[618] The question that I

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[616]Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 199.

[617]Eight kings mentioned in Gen. 36:31-39 are as follows: Bela > Jobab > Husham > Hadad > Samlah > Shaul > Baal-hanan > Hadar.

[618]MT reads "Hadar," but many other textual traditions such as 1 Chr. 1:50, SP, and Pesh. support "Hadad". Cf. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 399.

intend to discuss in this section is why the narrator has listed the names of kings in Edom, particularly commenting "before any king reigned for the Israelites" (Gen. 36:31)? What does this statement tell the readers about Esau and his descendants? I argue that listing out the names of kings in Edom offers further evidence of the narrator's portraying Esau and his descendants favourably. A favourable reading of Esau and his descendants is also possible in this king list.

Edom Produced Kings Earlier than Israel

Within the Esau-Jacob narrative, the readers have already read that God told Jacob that kings will spring from Jacob (Gen. 35:11). Previously, God also promised Abraham and Sarah that kings will come from them (Gen. 17:6, 16). For this reason, the existence of the Edomite king list in Genesis is very ironic. The list of kings in Edom ironically shows that it is Esau's descendants who produced kings earlier than Jacob's descendants despite the fact that Esau presumably has not received such a promise from God.[619] The Bible does not always favour kings and kingship (e.g 1 Sam 8), but the image of kings is generally positive (e.g. Gen. 49:10; Deut. 17:14-20).[620] The Bible often describes kings as having special relationship with God, such as the relationship like the father-son relationship (cf. Ps. 2:7; 89:27; 2 Sam. 7:14). Kings are often designated as the anointed of Yahweh (cf. 2 Sam. 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Sam. 1:14, 16), which signifies the sacred nature of king.[621] When it comes to kings and kingship in relation to foreign nations, the image of kings is not always positive. However, the king is still regarded as a symbol

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[619]Cf. Spina, "Esau: The Face of God," 29.

[620]Spina, "Esau: The Face of God," 29.

[621]Keith W. Whitelam, "King and Kingship," *ABD* 4: 45.

of great power in war (cf. 1 Sam. 8:19-20), and that is also the reason why the Israelites strongly wanted to have a king to rule them like other neighbouring nations. Therefore, the record that Edom comes to have kings earlier than Israel highlights our narrator's positive and favourable attitude toward Esau and his descendants. By listing the Edomite king list, the narrator has shown the concern for Esau's descendants.

There could be several counterarguments against my favourable reading of the Edomite king list. First of all, although the image of kings is generally positive, there is still an ambiguity in the translation of Gen. 36:31 to be resolved for a favourable reading of this verse and the following verses. Genesis commentators such as Victor P. Hamilton and John Skinner suggest a possibility of reading לִפְנֵי מְלֹךְ־מֶלֶךְ לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל in Gen. 36:31 as "before a king of the Israelites reigned (over Edom)", by taking לְ in לִבְנֵי as introducing a genitive.[622] This reading, "These are the kings who reigned in the land of Seir *before a king of the Israelites reigned (over Edom)*", could challenge my argument that the narrator sheds a favourable light on Edom by implying that Edom produced kings first. However, as noted by Claus Westermann,[623] the above reading suggested by commentators such as Victor P. Hamilton and John Skinner is grammatically very peculiar. This last part of the statement cannot mean "before a king of the Israelites ruled (over Edom)." Furthermore, there is additional textual evidence that we need to consider. According to Num. 20:14, Moses sent messengers to *the king of Edom* (מֶלֶךְ אֱדוֹם) to ask permission to pass through the land of Edom. Regardless of how to translate the last part of Gen. 36:31, Num. 20:14 also shows that there was already a

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[622]Cf. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 399; Skinner, *Genesis*, 434.

[623]Claus Westermann comments, "First, this is scarcely possible grammatically; and second, an early form of the same simultaneous chronology is at hand which was worked out in the king lists in the comparative chronology between Judah and northern Israel." See Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 565.

king in Edom when the Israelites escaped slavery from Egypt and were passing through Transjordan.[624] When the Israelites were wandering without any king or territory, Num. 20:14 indicates that Edom already had a king, had their own territory and settled down there. Although it is not clear when or what period the list of Edomite kings in Genesis 36 refers to, it is unambiguously implied that Edom already had kings before Israel had a king.

Secondly, one may question the relationship between Esau's descendants and these Edomite kings. If these Edomite kings are not from Esau's descendants, then my favourable reading of this Edomite king list may be regarded as inappropriate. R. Christopher Heard points out the lack of overlap between the names of Edomite kings and the names of Esau's descendants and clans.[625] For example, the only name in the Edomite king list which corresponds to the rest of Genesis 36 is Zerah: (1) In Gen. 36:13 and 17, Zerah is Reuel's son (thus Esau's grandson); (2) The second king Jobab in the Edomite king list also has a father named Zerah (cf. Gen. 36:32). Heard, however, insists that the specification "Zerah of Bozra" attached to the second king, Jobab's father, suggests that they are different individuals.[626] Furthermore, Heard points out a possibility that the Edomite kings are not from Esau's descendants. Heard comments:

> If these kings are not themselves descendants of Esau — and nothing in Genesis 36 actually suggests that they are —, then their rule in "the land of Edom" may actually preclude Esau's political control over that land, and these kings are kings of "Edom" only by an anachronistic/proleptic geographical use of the term "land of Edom" (the equation "Esau is Edom" is too strongly pressed in this chapter

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[624]Cf. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 339.

[625]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 129.

[626]Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 129. *Contra* Gunkel, *Genesis*, 378.

> [vv. 1, 8, 9] for "the land of Edom" to mean something other than "the land of Esau ['s descendants]").[627]

Heard argues that nothing in Genesis 36 suggests that Edomite kings are descendants of Esau, but this is simply not true. In Gen. 36: 9, 43, Esau is called the father of Edom (or Edomites in collective sense). As Heard points out, the idea of identifying "Esau" with "Edom" is embedded in Genesis 36. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that the Edomite kings have no relationship with the eponymous ancestor Esau or his descendants.

Although Heard suggests that labelling the kings in Gen. 36:31-39 as "Edomite", done by many Genesis commentators,[628] may be misleading,[629] he does not actually provide what "the kings in the land of Edom" could possibly mean other than "the Edomites." The king list in Genesis 36 forms a significant portion of Esau's long genealogy, and there is no reason to believe that this king list alone is not part of Esau's genealogy. No matter where they are from, Edomite kings, by the fact that they are identified with Esau and included in the long genealogy of Esau, are descendants of Esau, and Esau is the father of the Edomites.

When Did the Edomite King List Refer to?

With regard to the time period of the kings in the list, there is nothing much we can know for sure. Many scholars believe that these kings belong around the time of David who subdued Edom (2 Sam. 8:13-14), taking their

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[627]See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 129–30.

[628]Gunkel, *Genesis*, 378–9; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 400–1; von Rad, *Genesis*, 346; Skinner, *Genesis*, 434–5; Speiser, *Genesis*, 282; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 339; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 568.

[629]Heard points out that as succession of kings is not dynastic, this succession does not imply "Esau-ide" political control over "the land of Edom" during the relevant time frame. See Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 130.

clue from "before there were kings for the Israelites."[630] More specifically, Victor P. Hamilton comments, "Indeed, eight generations back from the time of Saul and David would bring us to the period of 13th century B.C.E, enhancing the possibility that the Edomite kings and Israelite judges were contemporaries and entered into their respective offices on the same basis."[631] Similarly, Gary A. Rendsburg also suggests that this king list originates from the early monarchy period.[632] This argument is, however, untenable because we do not know for sure when the preposition "before" (לִפְנֵי) could exactly refer to. It could be right before there were kings for the Israelites as supposed by the above argument, but there is also another possibility that it could be much earlier before there were kings in Israel. If we assume that Hadad, not Hadar in MT, is the last name of Edomite king list (as supported by several textual traditions),[633] then the time period of Edomite kings in the list could be around the time of Israelite monarchy as Hadad was the Edomite adversary against Solomon (cf. 1 Kgs 11). From the textual-critical perspective, the name "Hadar" only appears in Gen. 36:39, and this could be a mistake for the well-attested name "Hadad" in the Hebrew Bible.[634] Nevertheless, the evidence to prove the last name of the king as Hadad in Solomon's time (1 Kgs. 11) is still flimsy.

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[630]Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 379; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 400; Skinner, *Genesis*, 435; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 339.

[631]Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 401.

[632]Gary A. Rendsburg comments, "If it [the list of Edomite kings] were from an earlier period, such a statement would be impossible. If it were from a later period, we would expect an Edomite king list beyond that of the time before 1000, i.e., 'before a king reigned over the Israelites.'" See Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis*, 109-10.

[633]Textual traditions such as 1 Chr. 1:50; Pesh. and SP support "Hadad" instead of "Hadar". See also A. M. Honeyman, "The Evidence for Regnal Names Among the Hebrews," *JBL* 67 (1948): 24. n.44. Honeyman also identifies Hadad in Gen. 36:39 with Hadad who revolted against Solomon (cf. 1 Kgs. 11).

[634]The final Hebrew letters in these names are very similar (ר in "Hadar" and ד in "Hadad").

From a different perspective, there are also scholars who take the period of the kings in the list as being much earlier before the Israelite monarchy. For example, B. Jacob argues that kings in the list could refer to Pre-Mosaic kings of Edom.[635] As there was already a king in Edom when the Israelites were passing through Transjordan after escaping slavery from Egypt (cf. Num. 20:14), referring the list to the time period before or around the exodus from Egypt is not improbable but it can be by no means proven. Whenever the Edomite king list chronologically fits, the Genesis author's concern in the Edomite king list does not seem to give precise information about the historical time period of these kings. If it was the Genesis author's main purpose, the author could have offered more detailed clues for readers. All we can know for sure, reading from the Edomite king list in Genesis 36, is that these Edomite kings precede Israelite kings and that this fact sheds a favourable light on Esau and his descendants.

What Lies Behind the Edomite King List?

Besides the narrator's interest in the earlier production of kings in Edom than Israel, there is another interesting point in the king list which also could offer a positive and favourable reading of this list. The Edomite king list shows an elective pattern of kingship and peaceful turnover of political power among kings. First of all, compared with Israelite or other neighbouring countries, the Edomite king list shows a more advanced political system. As it does not provide any clue of dynastic pattern of kingship, there is a considerable possibility that the Edomite kingship could be elective. As noted by several commentators, such as Gordon J. Wenham and Victor P. Hamilton,

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[635]B. Jacob, *Das Erste Buch der Tora* (New York: Ktav, 1974). Quoted from Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 339.

no king in the list is a son of his predecessor.[636] Each king is also from a different place of origin. No king comes from the place of his predecessor's origin. As several commentators point out, this non-dynastic monarchy in Edom is very peculiar in the ancient Near East. Although not all nations employed dynastic kingship in the ancient Near East, elective kingship was not that popular at the time.[637] Dynastic kingship was still the norm in many nations.[638] As shown from the biblical texts, Judah's political system before the destruction of Jerusalem was based on the Davidic dynasty. Although the Northern kingdom Israel was not always faithful to dynastic principles in their kingship, this principle is still embedded in the Northern Israelite political system. Therefore, the Edomite king list could imply a more advanced and democratic political system.

Secondly, this Edomite king list implies a peaceful turnover of political power among kings. There have been many rebellions or non-dynastic successions in Israel as manifested in the book of Kings,[639] but according to this list, the Edomite monarchy seems to go very smoothly. We cannot simply ignore the possibility that there were blood feuds and scrambles for political power in the succession of these kings but the narrator might not narrate these conflicts. However, if conflicts in the succession of kings were not written, it could be either because they are not significant at all or they have not

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[636]Gunkel, *Genesis*, 379; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 400; Sarna, *Genesis*, 408–9; Skinner, *Genesis*, 435; Speiser, *Genesis*, 282; Waltke, *Genesis*, 486; Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 339.

[637]Cf. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 400; Waltke, *Genesis*, 486.

[638]However, the precise nature of kingship in the ancient Near East is still debatable among scholars, although many nations kept dynastic principles. The kingship in Israel is, in its nature, also not decisive. Keith W. Whitelam thus comments that whether the kingship in Israel is dynastic or charismatic, elective, or absolute has been a matter of considerable debate. For further discussion, see Whitelam, "King and Kingship," 40–8.

[639]For example, see Baasha (1 Kgs. 15:28), Zimri (1 Kgs. 16:10), Omri (1 Kgs. 16:28), Jehu (2 Kgs. 9:6), and so forth.

happened. The possibility that such severe conflicts in the succession have really happened is rather flimsy.

Why is it that the Genesis author included this elective kingship of Edomites? Is it to compare it with Israelite kingship either in a positive or negative way? Or is it simply to show their different political system? Whatever the case is, one thing clear from this king list is that the author has not included the Edomite king list with a hostile attitude toward Esau and his descendants. As Israel never had such an elective kingship, Edomite kingship which also shows peaceful turnover of power among kings stands out from biblical testimony.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have suggested reading Esau's migration to Seir favourably as Esau's entering his promised land and also discussed the significance of Esau's genealogy along with the Edomite king list. Although we modern readers may easily skip Genesis 36 as if the genealogies in Genesis 36 are footnotes or an appendix, I have shown that a close reading of Esau's genealogy can lead us to grasp the probable ideology of the Genesis author embedded in Esau's genealogy. The long list of names puts Esau and his descendants in a favourable light. Esau's genealogy shows the narrator's concern for Esau and his descendants. Although Esau and Jacob were not completely reconciled because of Jacob's fear of Esau, the author's concern, in the inclusion of Esau's genealogy, may show the hope that the two brothers would indeed be reconciled as friendly brothers. As some of Esau's genealogy contains familiar Israelite names such as Reuel and Zerah, this list also shows that Esau's descendants are not quite foreign to Jacob's descendants. Esau's descendants are after all the brothers of Jacob's descendants. Esau's genealogy

introduced by the *toledot* formula stresses the great importance of Esau's genealogy. The Edomite king list is further evidence of the narrator's favourable attitude toward Esau's descendants. The genealogies are not merely literary markers of the narrative or the summary of the non-chosen son. A careful reading of Esau's genealogy leads us to conclude that Esau's genealogy needs to be read as a supplementary story to the Esau story.

Conclusions:
Liberating Esau From His Negative Image

Overview

In the present study, I have discussed the positive narrative portrayal of Esau in the book of Genesis from a literary-synchronic perspective. As reviewed in chapter one, many interpreters including contemporary Genesis commentators, Paul, the author of Hebrews, and the rabbis[640] have been very eager to read Esau unfavourably. Furthermore, historical critics have been more interested in the Esau-Jacob story as an etiological story of the two nations Israel and Edom, primarily taking their cue from the divine oracle (Gen. 25:23) and Isaac's blessings (Gen. 27:27-29, 39-40). However, contrary to previous interpreters of the Esau story, I have approached the Esau story from a different perspective.

First of all, I have offered a reading which treats the Esau-Jacob story as a story about two brothers first rather than quickly relating the Esau-Jacob story to any political relationship between Edom and Israel. For example, I have shown that the divine oracle (Gen. 25:23) and Isaac's blessings for Esau and Jacob (Gen. 27:27-29; 27:39-40) can be primarily related to Esau and Jacob at an individual level, not exclusively to Edom and Israel at a national level. By interpreting and reflecting on the effect of the divine oracle and Isaac's blessings on the lives of the two brothers, I have also shown that they work coherently with the overall plot of the Esau-Jacob narrative and that the Esau story can be read as having portrayed Esau in a positively *favourable* and *honourable* way—not merely in a sympathetic way.

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[640]See chapter one of this study.

Secondly, I have criticised the Genesis commentators' version of Esau who is often understood as being stupid in selling his precious birthright, ignoring his family tradition by marrying foreign wives, being cursed or at best getting a secondary blessing from his father, and being still foolish enough to be deceived by Jacob again. If he is not stupid, then he is hypocritical. The significance of Esau's genealogy is also overlooked in most Genesis commentators' version of the Esau story. By weakening or undermining these commentators' premises or presuppositions about Esau, such as viewing him as a negative, minor, or insignificant character, I have suggested a new and more favourable interpretation of Esau, which has maximised the positive and favourable nature of Esau's character. I hope that I have challenged how these commentators think, accept, or acknowledge certain negative ideas about Esau. At one level, the Esau-Jacob narrative does allow readers to focus on Jacob, but I have also questioned why interpreting and commenting on the Esau-Jacob narrative has been done in this fashion by most commentators.

In undertaking my interpretative approach to Esau, however, my intention was not to insist that this negative image of Esau can be replaced with one of Esau as a patriarch who is worthy of being chosen in place of Jacob, bearing God's promise for Abraham's descendants and Israel. Ethically, Esau may be regarded as a better candidate than Jacob for God's election, but God favoured Jacob and His favouritism affected His election. What the present study aimed at is not to question the way in which God's election works. Its purpose was to criticise most Genesis commentators' version of reading the Esau-Jacob narrative, which views Esau negatively and unfavourably as a result of focusing on Jacob the chosen one, and to bring a balance to the study of the biblical characterisations of Esau and Jacob by means of offering a study of the biblical characterisation of Esau. This reading

suggests that Esau may be a favourable and honourable character from the narrator's point of view. If one gets rid of presuppositions about Esau as a negative type, it is not hard to see the more positive nature of Esau's character. As described by the narrator through Jacob's words, Esau's tolerance was figuratively described to God's face. What can be legitimately argued from the present study is that the portrayal of Esau in the Genesis text is not necessarily negative or unfavourable. What gives rise to negative interpretations of Esau in most Genesis commentaries are the bias and negative assumptions against this one particular character Esau as a minor character and non-chosen character. In order to uncover scholarly negative assumptions and presuppositions about Esau, the present study has suggested a counter reading to the dominant interpretation of Esau.

Various readings of the same text are both possible and inevitable. The reading I have presented challenges the ideas that the moral evaluation of a character in the biblical text is fixed and that biblical commentaries are able to offer neutral comments. Biblical commentaries including later biblical texts themselves are not value free. As the present study has demonstrated, it is negative scholarly assumptions which have made the negative image of Esau in their Genesis commentaries. The negative image of Esau in the text of Genesis itself is demonstrably less strong than that of contemporary Genesis commentaries. As the results of this study, it can be reasonably argued that negative interpretations of Esau do not derive from the Genesis text itself and he could be legitimately interpreted more positively and favourably.

Readers of the Esau-Jacob story have been presented with many interpretations of Esau and Jacob through a number of Genesis commentaries, but we are still left to ask, "Which is a better interpretation?" What interpreters can do is to consider all of the narrator's words in the Esau-Jacob story and

suggest a plausible interpretation. Contrary to most Genesis commentaries' unfavourable reading of Esau as stupid, reckless, cruel, and hypocritical, the present study has re-told the story of Esau and Jacob focusing on Esau from Esau's point of view. I believe it acceptable and correct to conclude that the Genesis narrator has characterised Esau as a favourable character but it is our Genesis commentators who have obscured it with their negative assumptions about Esau. Esau is free and easy—not stupid and reckless. He is outgoing, honourable, and generous—not cruel or hypocritical.

Significance of the Present Study and Agenda for Further Research

Over the last decades, there have been a number of studies on the Esau-Jacob narrative, and therefore it may be reasonable to ask whether another one like the present study is still necessary. Most studies on the Esau-Jacob narrative, however, have been focused on *Jacob* and the events happened to him such as his encounter with God at Bethel (Genesis 28 and 35) and wrestling with a mysterious man at the Jabbok (Genesis 32). On the contrary, Esau, Jacob's twin brother, has not been the subject of a full-length character study in biblical scholarship. There have been shorter studies about Esau as a character in recent decades, but none of them provides a full, careful, and systematic discussion of Esau's portrayal as a favourable literary character in the biblical text.

Compared to Jacob, Esau as a literary character has not drawn attention from a majority of scholars. Frank A. Spina, in his book *The Face of the Outsider*,[641] has written a chapter about "Esau" and highlighted the positive portrayal of him, but most scholars were more interested in Edom rather than Esau as a literary character. Scholars such as John R. Bartlett and Piotr

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[641] Spina, "Esau: The Face of God".

Bienkowski[642] have written about *Edom* from a historical perspective, but their works primarily seek archaeological and historical evidence and have not undertaken detailed exegesis to understand Esau's character and its portrayal in the book of Genesis. According to my survey of literature, a few shorter studies such as Spina's work have emphasised the positive nature of Esau's character in the book of Genesis. For this reason, this study has attempted to remedy the current situation of Genesis scholarship and its lack of interest in Esau as a literary character. I hope that this study has stimulated scholarly interest in this literary character and has brought a new perspective on *Esau* who is not chosen by God.

The significance of this study also lies in its methodologies. First of all, as David J. A. Clines defined the nature of metacommentating,[643] what I have done was primarily to criticise what Genesis commentators do about Esau. I believe that my commenting on Genesis commentaries' view on Esau—metacommentating Genesis commentaries on the Esau story—has revealed that most Genesis commentators' writings about Esau contain negative ideologies or assumptions about Esau and strayed from objective interpretation of him. Although writing a metacommentary on the Esau story could be in the end similar to writing another commentary, examining what Genesis commentators do with regard to Esau is nevertheless a different practice and it is helpful to re-evaluate the level of scholarly authority that our representative Genesis commentaries have. Contemporary Genesis commentaries on the

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[642]See Bartlett, "The Brotherhood of Edom"; John R. Bartlett, "The Land of Seir and the Brotherhood of Edom," *JTS* 20 (1969): 1–20; John R. Bartlett, "Rise and Fall of the Kingdom of Edom," *PEQ* 104 (1972): 26–37; Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites*; Piotr Bienkowski, "The Edomites: The Archaeological Evidence From Transjordan," in *You Shall Not Abhor an Edomite for He is Your Brother: Edom and Seir in History And Tradition* (ed. Diana V. Edelman; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 41–92.

[643]David J. A. Clines comments, "When we write commentary, we read what commentators say. When we write metacommentary, we notice what commentators do." See Clines, *Interested Parties*, 76.

Esau-Jacob story, which have been focused on the character Jacob, will affect non-specialists for their Bible study. It is obvious that readers of these commentaries will not have a good impression of this dis-elected character Esau, because most Genesis commentaries have not read the story of Esau favourably and they have interpreted the story of Esau from the perspective of the elect. I believe that my favourable reading of Esau and criticism of previous readings of Esau in several Genesis commentaries has suggested a way to bring a balance in understanding the story of Esau and Jacob as a whole.

Secondly, in the present study, I have examined ambiguous passages which at some level enable both positive or negative evaluations of Esau in the Esau-Jacob narrative, and I have primarily taken the path of reading them favourably and positively (that is, the "glass half-full approach" according to my definition). As my readerly decision on ambiguous passages about Esau's actions or speeches was all positive, I admit that it occasionally forced me to write in defence of Esau. My reading of Esau is defensive regarding Esau's actions, speeches, or the narrator's comments on Esau and it is certainly different from contemporary Genesis commentators' views which have primarily taken the path of interpreting ambiguous passages on Esau negatively (that is, the "glass half-empty approach" according to my definition). I hope that the readers of the present study will judge that my reading of Esau is arguably more plausible than Genesis commentators' versions. Even if it is not, I still believe that this study at least has contributed to suggesting a way to bring a balance between understanding the story of Esau negatively and understanding it positively.

I think that my way of reading could be applied to reading other narratives in the Bible which have dealt with rivalry between two brothers or

two characters. For example, as a rival character of Isaac, Ishmael can be re-evaluated and interpreted more positively and favourably, just as I have interpreted Esau favourably. As a bearer of God's blessing and promise of a great nation (cf. Gen. 17:20), Ishmael also shows positive and favourable characteristics which have not been properly evaluated by commentators. The story about David and Saul is also a good example. There is no doubt that most commentators have interpreted the story of David and Saul, focusing on David or favouring David rather than Saul. However, reading the story of David focusing on David is not the only way of reading the David narrative. Reading the story of David and Saul from Saul's perspective is another way of reading the same story and it will give a new perspective to understand politics or political maneuver in the story of David.[644]

Finally, I hope that my ethical, cultural, and social perspectives have contributed to offering a reading different from European and North American scholars' reading of Esau. In chapter one, I have discussed that people from various ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds read and interpret the Bible with their particular understandings influenced by their experiences. In this study, I think that my perspectives as an Asian reader have led me approach the Esau story with a different perspective from European and North American scholars. My reading of Esau's marriages where I have criticised Isaac rather than Esau based on the context of Korean immigrants in North America would be considered such an example. According to my view, reading the Bible as an Asian—more specifically as a Korean biblical scholar in training—is different

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[644]Scholars such as J. Cheryl Exum, Diana V. Edelman and David M. Gunn approached to Saul this way. See J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Diana V. Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah* (JSOTSup 121; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story* (JSOTSup 14; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980).

from reading it as a reader from other countries. Although it is very slippery to point out certain characteristics from a particular country, there exist several stereotyped characteristics and they certainly affect the way we read the biblical story. I do not mean that all Korean biblical scholars would read the story of Esau as I do because of individual differences, but I hope that the present study has suggested a model of culture-context specific interpretation of the Esau story from a Korean perspective. The number of Korean biblical scholars in North America is increasing, and the increasing number of participants in the session *Asian and Asian American Hermeneutics Group* at the SBL Annual Meeting also shows that scholarly interests in Asian or Asian-American contextual interpretation is gradually increasing. It is my hope that the present study would stimulate scholarly interest in this Asian and Asian-American hermeneutics.

Although the present study has covered crucial literary aspects of interpreting the Esau-Jacob narrative with its methodologies such as metacommentating, text-resisting and reader response, it obviously did not cover other aspects of interpreting, such as discussing the historical or social context of the Esau-Jacob narrative. The major goal of this research — to criticise Genesis commentators' negative version of the Esau story and explain how favourably the narrator has portrayed Esau — has already been accomplished. Given that the narrator has portrayed Esau favourably as I have suggested, the question about how this favourable portrayal of Esau has originated in certain historical or social contexts needs to be discussed for further research. For historical critics who are more interested in the world behind the Esau-Jacob story, it will be recommendable to do further research on how this favourable portrayal of Esau and its narrative contents could be possibly related to a particular historical period of Edom and Israel's history.

Scholars who have read the story of Esau and Jacob etiologically have various opinions about the possible historical contexts of this narrative. Traditionally, many scholars have taken the monarchic times as its possible historical context. More specifically, John Bartlett has taken the period of David as its historical context. He insists that David's conquest of Edom caused the identification of Esau with Edom.[645] Israel Finkelstein has regarded the story of Esau and Jacob as reflecting late monarchic times.[646] Based on the lifestyle and ethnic and socio-political picture in the narrative, Benjamin Mazar has suggested the end of the period of the Judges and the beginning of monarchy as corresponding to its historical context.[647]

Unlike the scholars above, recent biblical scholarship tends to take a later period, such as the exilic or post-exilic period as a possible historical or social context of the Esau-Jacob narrative. Scholars such as E. Theodore Mullen and Naomi Steinberg have thought that the Esau-Jacob narrative was produced in post-exilic times.[648] I have briefly introduced several scholarly positions according to which the proposed historical background of the Esau-Jacob narrative varies from monarchic times to post-exilic or even to Maccabean times. Influenced by William F. Albright and his school, conservative scholars in America and elsewhere still believe the essential reliability of the patriarchs and the Mosaic traditions.

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[645]See Bartlett, "The Brotherhood of Edom," 16–21.

[646]Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 40.

[647]Benjamin Mazar, "The Historical Background of the Book of Genesis," *JNES* 28 (1969): 76–7.

[648]See E. Theodore Mullen, Jr., *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations: A New Approach to the Formation of the Pentateuch* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 9–10, 69; Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 143–4; Heard, *Dynamics of Diselection*, 8–22; Danna N. Fewell, "Imagination, Method, and Murder: Un/Framing the Face of Post-Exilic Israel," in *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies: Identity and the Book* (ed. Timothy K. Beal and David M. Gunn; London: Routledge, 1996), 132–52.

According to my understanding, such various and wide-ranging proposals as to the possible historical context of the Esau-Jacob narrative suggest that there are still many areas that we cannot know for sure regarding the historical context of the Esau-Jacob narrative. Questions such as when this narrative was given, who composed it in its final form, and what role the final editor had in its composition are hard to be answered satisfactorily. A favourable description of Esau could be related to a certain historical period when Israelites' attitudes toward Esau's descendants or Edomites are not hostile. However, we still need to be careful about arguing that the Esau story was written in a particular period, even if the story itself can correspond to a certain historical situation. There is always a possibility that the story can refer to a certain historical situation without itself being written in that period.

In this study, I have mentioned that a political reading of the Esau-Jacob narrative is possible but not inevitable.[649] For this reason, I have not made exhaustive efforts to discuss historical reconstructions of all the events narrated in the Esau-Jacob narrative, which I do not think directly relevant to this research and it is also beyond the scope of my research. Although I basically approached the Esau-Jacob story as a story, I do not undermine the questions that historical critics pursue. Telling a good and interesting story sometimes could be a motive for a storytelling, but a question like what purpose—political, social, or ideological—the storyteller had in mind for his or her contemporary readers cannot be simply disregarded. The Esau-Jacob story is not likely written purely for the purpose of explaining what happened in the past to these characters. There may be a reason for its storytelling and writing. Consequently, possible motives for the production of this favourable Esau story can be also researched further.

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[649]For example, see concluding remarks of chapter 6.

There are still many areas that can be researched further along the lines indicated in the present study, but the most directly relevant ones would be literary studies on minor male characters in the book of Genesis. In the introduction of this study, I have pointed out that we have literary studies on the patriarchs and female minor characters in Genesis. However, literary studies on minor male characters or dis-elected characters such as Esau and Ishmael are scarce. I hope that the present study has contributed to Esau scholarship and provided an agenda for further research on the characterisation of minor male characters in the book of Genesis.

Liberating Esau from His Negative Image

In the book of Genesis, there is undeniable emphasis on the particular chosen family and election of this family. However, we need to note that the book of Genesis does not exclude the others. There is more than the matter of election in the patriarchal narrative and the way in which most commentators read the book of Genesis focusing on this chosen family is not the only way of reading the Genesis stories. In reading the Esau-Jacob narrative, we also need not view Esau as a "baddy" and Jacob as a "goody" dichotomously. They are not such flat characters. A close reading of the Esau-Jacob narrative reveals that Esau is more than dis-elected. Esau's life is blessed more than Jacob in many ways and his forgiveness of his prodigal brother is morally and ethnically exemplary for readers. Although negative evaluations of Edom and hostility against Edomite people appear in later biblical texts, the Genesis author has not projected such a hostility. After all, Esau's descendants are close relatives to Jacob's descendants, and they were meant to have a friendly relationship with Israelites as codified in Deut. 23:7. Esau's interpreters have hated Esau, but Esau is a favourable and blessed man from the viewpoint of the Genesis narrator. Esau should not be hated.

לֹא־תְתַעֵב אֲדֹמִי כִּי אָחִיךָ הוּא

You shall not abhor an Edomite for he is your brother (Deut. 23:7)[650]

[650]Deut. 23:8 in Masoretic Text. By quoting this phrase, I do not mean that Esau is an Edomite. We cannot easily say that Esau is an Edomite and Jacob an Israelite. However, the connection between Esau and Edom in the book of Genesis does not prevent readers from relating Edomites to Esau, or Esau to Edomites vice versa. Therefore, the code of Deuteronomy "You shall not abhor an Edomite..." cannot be regarded as being irrelevant to Esau.

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